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Wilson Air lands in Houston

No. 1 fixed base operator continues expansion plans

By Jane Roberts
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Houston has plenty of Holiday Inns; this week it's getting its own Wilson Air Center, the fixed base operator that has come to be the premier name in airport service for corporate travelers.

Memphis-based Kemmons Wilson Cos. bought the 16-acre Fletcher Aviation in September, one of five FBOs at Houston Hobby Airport. The company is now in the process of remodeling the 1950s-era buildings and deciding where the signature canopy will go, said Bob Wilson, president.

"You've got to think the way it's going to look down the road. I can envision it," he said.

The sales price was not given.

Fletcher is the second FBO to open under the Wilson brand this year. In February, in a \$250,000 annual management agreement with the City of Charlotte, N.C., Wilson took over operation of the FBO formerly run by Signature Flight Support at Charlotte Douglas International Airport.

Within weeks, jet fuel sales -- the litmus of FBO use -- were up 35 percent. Wilson added ramp concierges and shuttle buses to move people quickly to and from aircraft.

"We used to get a couple of complaints a week. Now all we get are compliments," said Willard Plentl, deputy aviation director in Charlotte. "Since Wilson took over, we've added a 400-space parking lot to accommodate all the charters. Revenues are up; utilization is up."

Wilson intends a similar transformation at Fletcher, a run-down FBO that includes three hangars, office space and shops.

It has doubled the staff to 20 and is remodeling the facility, adding closed-circuit video monitoring for security and a customer entrance with 100-car parking.

"In a couple of weeks, new siding will be up on the hangars. It will absolutely change it overnight," Wilson said.

Wilson Air started out in 1996 at 2930 Winchester. In a year, it had earned 22 percent of FBO fuel share at Memphis International Airport. Today, it has 60 percent and a name for excellence.

For six years straight, readers of Aviation International News have named Wilson Air here the No. 1 fixed base operation in the nation, ranking its service, pilot and passenger amenities, and overall appeal.

Last year, the company started branching out, saying it intended to own or manage three to five FBOs across the country.

Houston is the third, and the second FBO Wilson owns outright.

"In Charlotte, we recommend. In Houston and Memphis, we call all the shots," Wilson said.

But both models have their merits, he said in a business that has become increasingly competitive.

"FBOs are hot because business aviation is doing very well. Nobody needs to be reminded what a difficult experience it is to travel on the airlines these days," said Nigel Moll, Aviation International News editor.

Consequently, he said, in a post 9/11 world, "a lot of people feel the FBO industry is a good place to put money."

The challenge is that airports are "finite properties," he said, often hemmed in by residential areas and roads. "FBOs are hard to come by in desirable areas."

Houston, the nation's fourth-largest city, has a "tremendous number of corporate aircraft visiting the city and based in the city," said David Ivey, Wilson spokesman.

"In terms of corporate jets, they are five times as busy as Memphis."

Wilson intends to aggressively recruit business, filling the hangars with jets from Houston's largest companies.

"We proved we can do it with two; we think we can do it with three."

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