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HIGHFLYING AFFAIR

Aviation base is aiming to land lots of jet-setters

Wilson Air Center out to attract the rich, famous and powerful with upgraded service

BY BILL HENSEL JR.

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WHEN the rich, famous and powerful fly by private jet into Houston's Hobby Airport, Bob Wilson wants them to think of his place.

Wilson has just taken over Fletcher Aviation, which provides fuel, shelter and all kinds of services to those who don't fly commercial, and he's got plans to kick it up a notch.

Like putting together a gleaming VIP area, for starters. And offering personalized services like making sure special food and drinks requested by clients are waiting on arrival.

In other words, rather than operating what amounts to a truck stop for private planes, the goal is to make it more like visiting a luxury hotel.

It's all to win business as his company, Wilson Air Center, competes with a handful of such companies at Hobby Airport.

These companies, known as fixed-base operators, cater to corporate and business aircraft. While these corporate planes are commonly associated with trips by top executives, they are also used by managers and professional staff who need to quickly get to out-of-the-way places. They also play host to everyone from professional sports figures and teams to entertainers and politicians.

Wilson Air also needs to keep up with the competition here. For example, Houston-based Million Air, which has operations in 33 airports, has facilities at Hobby that feature a theater lounge, fitness center and swimming pool.

Keeping the high-end customers happy can be challenge. Wilson recalled the time when entertainer Bill Cosby's party called the airport 20 minutes from landing and wanted sweet tea and Starbucks coffee waiting in the limo.

The drinks were on hand when Cosby landed, but "we were sweating," Wilson said.

Wilson hasn't had time yet to make all the changes he wants. Wilson Air bought out longtime Hobby Airport operator Fletcher Aviation in September, and it's still operating under both names for the time being.

Knows hospitality business

Wilson Air has garnered industry awards in recent years as one of the top fixed-base operators in the country. The owner says he instinctively knows about the hospitality business because his father, the late Kemmons Wilson, was the founder of the Holiday Inn chain.

"It's a tired facility right now," he said. "But we've made a number of inroads."

The company already has doubled the staff at the 16-acre facility and has begun an extensive renovation. Plans call for existing 150,000 square feet of hangar facilities to be upgraded with new lighting and flooring.

"We expect executives to say, this is Houston, this is good," said Dave Ivey, vice president at Wilson Air Center.

Security also will be upgraded with a closed circuit video monitoring system — and a separate customer entrance available for those who value their privacy.

Red carpet for NBA

Operators like Wilson Aviation typically lease space from the city aviation department, which is how the operation is handled at Hobby. Ivey said he's looking forward to February, when the company plans to roll out the red carpet for the National Basketball Association's All-Star Game. It is expected to bring a flurry of corporate jets to Hobby as teams and sponsors make their grand appearances.

"We are really the front door to the city," Ivey said. "Your decision-makers fly on these private jets."

Wilson makes most of its money from selling fuel at its operations, but it also provides concierge services, from getting rental cars or limousines to catering food and drinks when needed.

Before buying Fletcher Aviation, Wilson got to know the family behind the Houston company as well as the airport where it is based.

Wilson said he met with Maybelle Fletcher, whose family founded the company in 1945, and discovered they shared the same kind of family values. He also studied the 25-year plan recently unveiled for Hobby that maps its growth.

"This is probably the only place that doesn't get affected," he said.

Expansion from Memphis

The Memphis-based company started serving private planes in that city in 1996. Just this year, it has expanded to Charlotte and Houston.

Jerry Orr, aviation director at the Charlotte airport, noted that the price of jet fuel fell \$1.26 a gallon when Wilson took over the operation there in February. Before, the airport had some of the nation's highest fuel prices.

"That gets people's attention, and it drives business, too," Orr said. "It makes people seek you out instead of running from you."

Officials in Charlotte, which is home to a host of Fortune 500 corporations like Bank of America, have received positive feedback since Wilson took over as the fixed-base operator.

"We continue to get positive comments from pilots and users as far as service is concerned," he said.

With 28 years of aviation management experience, Ivey is credited with much of the success Wilson Aviation Center has enjoyed. He oversees the long-term strategic development and operations at the centers.

Readers of Aviation International News have named Wilson the top fixed-base operation in the country for six consecutive years. They vote on everything from amenities to service.

Wilson maintains that in operating his aviation business, he is combining the customer service he learned from his father with his love of aviation.

He noted that he had a pilot's license even before he had a driver's license.