

Wilson Air seeks growth at airport

By Jane Roberts
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Wilson Air Center, the most-awarded fixed base operator in the country, is seeking permission to expand again at Memphis International Airport.

Thursday, the Memphis-Shelby County Airport Authority will consider its request for four additional acres, including the former Fruehauf Manufacturing facility, the 12,000-square-foot building off Winchester near Wilson Air that has been empty since Northwest AirlinK vacated it more than five years ago.

Wilson intends to convert it into offices, plus build the 10,000-square-foot hangar that has been delayed for a year because of other construction at the airport.

"Business is driving the expansion," said Bob Wilson, head of Wilson Air. "A lot of companies or individuals want to have planes based in Memphis."

Wilson will invest in excess of \$5 million in the total project, said Richard White, director of properties for the airport authority.

Based on the investment, the authority is expected to extend Wilson's lease off Winchester through 2038. It is scheduled to end in 2026.

Wilson, among the authority's largest four tenants, will pay 40 cents a square foot to lease the one-story former AirlinK building.

"When a tenant makes substantial investment, the common practice is to extend the lease so they can amortize it over a longer period," said Larry Cox, authority president and CEO.

In less than 18 months, Wilson Air has taken over two FBOs, including the city-run business in Charlotte, N.C., and the 16-acre Fletcher Aviation it bought at Houston Hobby Airport.

"We've spent in excess of \$2.5 million in Houston, and that's nowhere near the total investment," Wilson said.

Within months, Wilson had doubled the staff to 20 and was remodeling the facility, adding closed-circuit video monitoring for security and a customer entrance with 100-car parking, intending to turn it into the winner Wilson Air has been in Memphis.

In October 2004, Wilson Air signed a \$250,000 annual management agreement with the City of Charlotte and took over operation of the FBO, which was 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.

Earlier this month, readers of International Aviation News named Wilson Air Center here the best FBO in the Americas for the seventh consecutive year.

No other FBO comes close to the distinction.

"This has been a good month for me," Wilson said.

On April 1, he received the Louis L. Carruthers Sierra Hotel Award, the highest civilian honor presented by the National Guard 164th Airlift Wing here.

The last recipient was Wilson's father, Kemmons Wilson, in 1999.

"That's what makes it so special to me," Wilson said.

Carruthers was a World War I ace and among the original people who helped build Memphis International Airport. The award honors outstanding contributions to progress of aviation in Memphis.

In November, Wilson will join a handful of distinguished airmen from Tennessee when he is inducted into the state's Aviation Hall of Fame in Sevierville.

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