

STRATEGIC BUSINESS PLAN FOR THE GEORGETOWN COUNTY AIRPORT



In late 2016 the Georgetown County Airport Commission determined the need for a strategic business plan to guide growth and investment in an already valuable property. Following coordination with the Georgetown County Department of Public Services and the County Council about expectations and possible outcomes, a committee of 22 members was appointed with representation from the Airport Commission, Georgetown County Department of Public Services, Georgetown County Council, City of Georgetown, Airport and Fixed Base Operator (FBO) management, South Carolina Aeronautics Commission, economic development organizations from both county and city, aeronautics education organizations, and outside observers. The committee met four times over five months to develop and refine the plan.

The committee adopted the general template for building a strategic business plan from *Airport Cooperative Research Program (ACRP) 20: Strategic Planning in the Airport Industry* and *ACRP 77: Guidebook for Developing General Aviation Airport Business Plans*. Both documents were produced by the Transportation Board of the National Academies under sponsorship of the Federal Aviation Administration. The process evolved from definition of the mission, vision and goals of the Airport to objectives and detailed action plans for attaining each objective. The plan clearly defines individual and organizational responsibilities and timelines for completion of actions and assigns the Airport Commission responsibility for monitoring progress.

The Georgetown County Airport is a general aviation airport under the South Carolina Airport Systems Plan that the U.S. Navy built in 1943 and which served as a U.S. Marine Corps Auxiliary Air Facility during World War II. In 1947 the facility reverted to civil control. In the intervening time Airport facilities have improved significantly. Currently, the Airport comprises one inactive and two active runways, a modern terminal with facilities for flight crews, classrooms and management, a maintenance hangar with full airframe and powerplant capabilities, 41 nested T-hangars, and one corporate hangar with another under construction. The 680-acre property has room for expansion to accommodate business and industry in the region.

»» The rapidly growing aerospace industry in South Carolina would find Georgetown County Airport an ideal location for suppliers given its expanse and robust transportation network.

Accordingly, the plan identifies the **mission** of the Airport...

» **“Serving as a gateway to coastal South Carolina for both business and pleasure, the Georgetown County Airport will provide exceptional hospitality and unmatched competitive services to visitors and tenants alike.”**

The mission acknowledges the important role that tourism plays in the County for transient visitors for whom Georgetown is a destination. Critically however, 60-70% of traffic at the Airport is business related. Consequently, the Airport cannot be content to serve only residents and short-term visitors, but must respond to the needs of those who regularly come to Georgetown to check on their investments or transact new ones. All should expect a warm, welcoming reception and excellent services whether staying an hour or a lifetime.

The plan’s **vision** expands beyond the current mission and targets existing and future opportunities in the County.

» **“As the best general aviation airport in coastal South Carolina in both access and services, the Georgetown County Airport will become a catalyst for economic growth and investment in the County and a center of excellence for aviation education.”**

The physical attributes of the Airport argue for significant expansion to attract and accommodate new businesses in the region and more investment in resort property. However, to attract aviation related industry to the Airport, the County must also generate the work force skills that would allow it to compete for new construction and/or relocation of suppliers to Georgetown. While some education initiatives are underway in the state, Georgetown County has not yet benefited from them. This plan would seek to change that.

Values underpin the recommended direction for the Airport.

» **“The Georgetown County Airport will extend its southern hospitality to visitors and residents alike and serve as a forward thinking partner of the community and its corporate interests.”**

The plan assesses where the County is in relation to aviation growth and proposes new directions to create an environment conducive to investment by aviation related businesses.

Based on surveys of both tenants and visitors to the Georgetown County Airport and data collected during the preparatory phase of this planning effort, the committee determined that the Airport had significant strengths. Among them are excellent facilities, especially runway 05-23 and the new terminal building. They support both business and tourism in the region and provide important emergency response capabilities in the event of a disaster. The Airport has sufficient property for expansion and provides quick access to a major land transportation network north and south. The Airport also maintains a positive reputation among the aviation community and has strong county and city political support. While the strengths are important, several factors detract from the appeal of the Airport. Runway 05-23 is weight limited, and 11-29 is usable only by light aircraft. Hangar space remains tight. A lack of awareness of the Airport among both the public and businesses in the region reduces demand for expansion and increased services. Minimal staffing makes it difficult to achieve high standards of appearance and maintenance of otherwise superb facilities.

However, the Airport has great opportunities. A short-fall in pilots and aircraft technicians will plague the aviation industry nationwide for the next several decades. The Airport would provide an outstanding base for pilot training and as a host to educational institutions like Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC) and the Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics (PIA). HGTC is located adjacent to the Airport already, while PIA has a major campus in Myrtle Beach. Increased hangar space could attract more retirees with aircraft moving to the south and those who are already here, but live in highly congested areas, like Mount Pleasant whose airport is saturated. More based aircraft could create incentives to expand maintenance services, including avionics. *Importantly, for businesses moving to the Charleston area, Georgetown provides a tremendous alternative with its available land, strong road network and lower prices.*



However, threats to the Airport and aviation in general are not insignificant. Declining Federal budgets will affect the ability of the Federal Aviation Administration to support Airport improvements. Another major aviation-related terrorist event could severely curtail general aviation across the United States. In South Carolina numbers of certificated aviators and licensed aircraft are declining and those that remain are moving to larger jet aircraft.

From this understanding, the plan defines four goals.



The Georgetown County Airport will become the best general aviation airport in coastal South Carolina within the next four years.

Achieving this goal requires significant enhancement of facilities. First, while the Airport boasts one of only three 6,000-foot runways at general aviation airports in South Carolina, that runway (05-23) has a weight limitation of 60,000 pounds, waivable in certain instances. However, both businesses and wealthy visitors whether on their private aircraft or a charter tend to use larger jet aircraft, which often exceed the weight limitations. Strengthening the runway to 100,000 pounds to accommodate aircraft up to the Gulfstream V will eliminate the restriction and open the Airport to many more visitors. Runway 11-29 needs rehabilitation, but FAA and State policy do not support rehabilitation of secondary runways. Actions will be initiated to repair holes and clear debris from the runway periodically to make it usable to light aircraft, but further repairs are unaffordable. Actions will also be taken to improve safety of the existing runways and approaches.

Secondly, while the Airport has great facilities, they are not necessarily in the best condition. New standards of appearance and maintenance of the Airport, based on surveys of other airports, established business airport standards and detailed inspection, will allow Georgetown to compete with any airport in the state. It will become the airport of choice for all visitors to the region. The 2019 County budget will reflect funding to meet these new standards.

Thirdly, Georgetown is proud of its southern heritage and traditions, among which is a special hospitality toward visitors. To embed that in the Airport and staff, standards of performance of management and staff based on known successes at other airports will ensure every visitor to Georgetown receives a welcome and treatment that epitomizes the southern tradition.

Fourth, since the Airport lacks aircraft storage facilities for both current residents and visitors, and especially for those desiring to move here and base their aircraft at Georgetown County Airport, the Airport must find the means to construct new facilities. The plan addresses alternative means to identify resources for this purpose and tasks specific individuals to research these methods and apply them to Georgetown. The objective is to begin construction within five years.

Finally, no airport can be the best in the state without a detailed and exercised emergency response plan. The plan seeks development or refinement of existing plans based on the best in the state and biannual exercises of the new plans in 2018. Sixteen separate actions support these five objectives.



Georgetown County Airport will become a stimulus for economic growth and investment in the county NLT end 2018.

Goal II focuses on increasing the economic value of the Airport to the county and its citizens. First, the committee came to understand that economic development and planning meetings of the city, county and private organizations often did not fully appreciate the capabilities and benefits of the Airport. Consequently, one member of the Airport Commission will join county and city economic planning meetings to ensure that the Airport is considered in current and future plans. Further, the Airport Commission will brief all local government and private economic development groups on the capabilities and plans of the Airport. This will help alleviate the gap in knowledge about this valuable asset to the community.

Secondly, a team will develop a marketing plan for the Airport, based on a previously developed, but unexecuted, plan and coordinate the new plan with County Economic Development. This coordination will help identify markets, which the plan should target. To assist the economic development community in marketing the Airport to potential business and industry customers, a comprehensive package of information about the availability of land, constraints on land use and an expedited permitting process will be developed. This has often stymied development at airports. No business wants to wait years to obtain building permits from local governments.

Finally, the Airport Commission will benchmark the Airport against those in the state that have had significant economic impacts on their communities and apply lessons learned to both marketing efforts and to future strategic plans. Nine actions support these objectives.



The Georgetown County Airport will become a recognized center of excellence for aviation education and training within 10 years.

The aviation industry projects large shortfalls in pilots and mechanics over the next 20 to 30 years. And, South Carolina has a burgeoning aeronautics industry that demands highly skilled workers. These are all jobs that are well remunerated and should be attractive to the youth of the county. At this point, however, there does not seem to be a concerted effort to provide the needed skills to county youth to compete for these positions. The one exception is the Advanced Manufacturing initiative sponsored by Horry-Georgetown Technical College (HGTC). As part of Goal III, the county will establish an aviation engineering program starting at middle school and advancing through high school to the college level. This program would complement current STEM initiatives already underway. The state has already developed a high school curriculum that begins this process, and the Young Eagles program exists in one county high school.

Initiatives to create a center of excellence at the Airport would combine these efforts and also promote a joint project with the Pittsburgh Institute of Aeronautics and HGTC to provide the skilled work force needed in this industry.

A second effort would target county youth and their families to encourage them to pursue careers in the aviation field. Many are not aware of the opportunities. Some parents discourage their children from entering this industry because of the “danger”. This unfounded concern prevents qualified young people from seeking out these opportunities. If the first effort seeks to provide the supply side of education, this second effort focuses on creating a demand side for education and training.

Finally, part of this goal would develop a flight school at the Airport to support what is understood anecdotally to be demand for such services. It would also support creating demand from youth of the county for flight training as other aviation initiatives grow. The current Fixed Base Operator (FBO) Seven Rivers Aviation has agreed to initiate a program to bring robust flight training capabilities to the Airport. Nine actions support these three objectives.

**GOAL
4****In order to make the improvements in Goals 1, 2 and 3, Georgetown County will increase revenues from the Airport sufficient to become self-sustaining within the next five years.**

This goal contains three objectives and relies, in part, on objectives and actions from previous goals to increase revenues at the Airport. Like one of the objectives in Goal 1, this goal also proposes new hangar construction, but primarily through the use of public-private partnerships and land leases.

The public-private partnership approach would also be employed to pursue construction of a restaurant at the Airport, which would both serve workers on the south side of Georgetown and attract visitors to the Airport, including families. The more familiarity parents and young people have with aviation the more likely they are to pursue a career in this field. This would assist with creating demand for aviation related education and training.

A second objective would seek to obtain more revenues from the Airport terminal through long and short-term leases of classroom and conference room spaces. These leases would not interfere with Airport operations, if properly structured and supervised.

Finally, this goal includes greater marketing of the Airport through advertisement of Georgetown County and City events on aviation related social and print media, as well as advertising these events on the Airport website. Also advertised would be aviation events planned at the Airport to attract visitors and families in Goal 1. The combination of all of these activities will generate more traffic at the Airport and consequently in the county and city. Eight actions support this goal and its objectives.

The Strategic Business Plan for the Georgetown County Airport provides a pathway to a future of opportunity for the county. If successful, the plan will provide increased revenues to the county, create jobs at the Airport and its environs, and help young people of the county identify and pursue a lucrative, high technology career in aviation. Execution of the plan will require attention to detail, adherence to milestones, the willingness of many volunteers to contribute time and effort to its achievement, and political support over the long term. Actions to date indicate that prospects for success are high.

It is recommended that this plan be reviewed and updated annually.

