



## **Renovations at Allegheny County Airport take off**

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Elizabeth Holmgren is too young to remember when commercial planes shuttled passengers to and from the art deco terminal at Allegheny County Airport. For her, the West Mifflin airport is a hot spot for local pilots and corporate jets. The recent completion of 18 new hangars, a taxi lane and other improvements solidifies the airport's commitment to those types of aviation enthusiasts, she said.

"This is the best thing that's ever happened to this airport. ... This is just, I think, the beginning," said Holmgren, 47, of Mt. Lebanon, as she raved about the new hangar, where she'll store a twin-engine plane for \$175 a month. "It's really great for general aviation. I say, 'Onward! Let's do more!'"

It's easy to overlook the county airport in favor of its bigger brother -- Pittsburgh International Airport, the 2.1-million-square-foot transit hub in Findlay that an estimated 11 million travelers pass through each year. While Pittsburgh International grabs headlines for its touch-and-go relationship with US Airways, officials and companies have been trying to bulk up the county airport.

The \$3.5 million hangar project is the most recent investment. Last month, Voyager Jet Center -- a charter flight operator based in West Mifflin -- announced a \$2 million jet-ramp expansion and fueling facility at the airport. That work is part of an improvement plan that started in 2004 and should total almost \$20 million by 2011, officials said. County Chief Executive Dan Onorato said those investments will help draw corporate traffic to West Mifflin the same way development in the international airport's corridor draws passengers, companies and jobs there.

"This is where a lot of executives fly out of," said Onorato, after a ribbon-cutting ceremony at the new hangars. "We're courting companies to expand. ... This is a key component to do that."

"I think the business right now is very active," said Mark Schreiner, executive vice president of Corporate Air, which is based at the county airport and logs 8,000 to 10,000 hours a year in corporate flights. "You see a lot of corporate travel going on right now."

Others are less sure how investments benefit the county airport.

Art Silverman said officials dealt poorly with airport tenants recently as they renegotiated hangar leases. Many patrons took new leases but some were frustrated by officials who, they said, did not pay them fair market value for hangars the individuals had built on leased airport land.

"I'm not against them revitalizing the airport," said Silverman, 71, of Churchill. "You want it to prosper. But, what are you stepping on me for?"

Silverman doubts investments will improve business for an airport that saw heavy corporate traffic 20 years ago, when more Fortune 500 companies were headquartered eight miles away Downtown.

"You can't go in the middle of the desert and say, 'Boy, this would be a great place to sell condominiums,'" he said.

"What does the general aviation public gain swapping 18 private hangars ... for 18 new hangars?" asked Harry Neel, 58, of Pleasant Hills, who owned two county airport hangars for his two planes. "There's really nothing good. They make it sound good. But, it's all smoke and mirrors."

"You need to get past the icing they put on the cakes," said Thomas Riemer, 55, of West Mifflin, who plans to move his home and plane out of Allegheny County. "There's no growth."

JoAnn Jenny, an airport spokeswoman, said there were not many problems during the hangar lease negotiations.

"We had a number of meetings with the tenants about this," Jenny said. "There was just a minority that expressed those types of concerns."

Jenny said there are about 60 leases for hangars at the airport, but she could not provide figures for past decades. She stressed, however, demand exists for hangar space.

"Our process ... had to do with putting together a plan for the future, the vision," she said.