

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears above any article. [Order a reprint of this article now](#)

**CLICK HERE TO LEARN MORE
 ABOUT AVIATION IN
 FLAGLER COUNTY**

EXPANSION PLANS

Path to the future: Longer runway key to growth at Flagler Airport

By [Aaron London](#)

aaron.london@news-jrn.com

Published: Sunday, April 10, 2016 at 4:52 p.m.

Change is in the wind at the Flagler County Airport, from extending the field's main runway, adding safety features to taxiways, and building a new fixed-base operator facility, to planning for a new Florida National Guard operational center on the property.

Those are the kinds of developments that Tripp Wacker, owner and operator of Ryan Aviation, has been waiting for since he relocated his business to the airport in 1994.

Wacker first came to the Flagler airport — built during World War II as an auxiliary training field for the U.S. Navy and located on State Road 100 across from Flagler Palm Coast High School — from Volusia County in 1989.

"I came up from Ormond Beach," he said. "Ormond couldn't offer me what this airport did."

In addition to the water runway on Gore Lake that Wacker needed for his seaplane pilot training business, the Flagler County Airport offered an even bigger intangible advantage: room to grow.

"One of the reasons I left Ormond Beach is they chose to land-lock their airport and not grow their airport," Wacker said.

The [Ormond Beach Municipal Airport has grown significantly](#) since Wacker left and now supports a 176-acre industrial park with 73 parcels, according to the 2015 airport master plan. Fifty-seven parcels have been sold and 29 businesses occupy more than 731,900 square feet of light industrial space, employing about 1,900 workers, the plan report states.

Flagler County officials would love to see similar growth and have long envisioned their county's 1,500-acre airport as a centerpiece for economic development. So much so that in late-2000, county commissioners declared 2001 to be "The Year of the Airport." Plans then also called for development of an airport industrial park to help bring in new business.

But while rapid population growth that led Flagler to become the nation's fastest-growing county in the early-2000s provided some momentum, capital investment has been slow to follow.

INVESTMENTS MADE



An Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University aircraft recently practices touch-and-go landings at the Flagler County Airport located off State Road 100 across from Flagler Palm Coast High School. NEWS-JOURNAL/DAVID TUCKER

Over the past seven years, \$25 million has been invested in the airport, mostly in the form of grants from the Florida Department of Transportation and Federal Aviation Administration. This money facilitated construction of a control tower, several mixed-use buildings on the airport property and other general improvements.

Now growth is expected to really take off with the relocation and lengthening of runway 1129 from 5,000 to 5,500 feet as the centerpiece.

"It's the single-most expensive project we've ever had," said Roy Sieger, the county's airport director. "The biggest project in the history of the airport, since it was built, is the relocation and expansion of runway 1129. We're just shy of \$15 million for this project."

Sieger said the new runway won't bring larger aircraft to Flagler County, but it will allow corporate jet traffic to take on more fuel at the facility.

"That is good for us," he said, "so we can sell more gas."

Fuel sales are one of the main revenue sources for the airport, which Sieger said is a "true enterprise fund" operation. Aviation gas at the airport costs \$3.56 a gallon for full service and \$2.96 for self serve. Jet A fuel costs \$3.22 a gallon.

"Fundamentally, we're a business," he said. "If we don't make the money, we don't spend the money."

Sieger said in addition to fuel sales, the airport generates revenue from land and building leases, T-hangar rentals for private planes and anything else that can bring in dollars.

"Anything we can do to make a dollar, we'll do," he said.

For the local business community, growth at the airport is a positive sign.

"We're seeing some activity and the fruit of the effort over the last several years is really exciting," said Rebecca DeLorenzo, president of the Flagler County Chamber of Commerce.

With the Chamber's headquarters right in front of the airport proper, DeLorenzo has a front-row seat to see the growth at the facility.

"It is setting the groundwork for future economic growth," she said of the projects underway. "It opens up bigger opportunities for our community."

DeLorenzo said many county residents are probably unaware of just how busy the airport is these days.

"Most of Flagler County probably isn't aware of how active our airport is," she said.

According to a 2014 FDOT report, the Flagler County Airport was the busiest general aviation airport in Florida and the third-busiest in the nation in terms of takeoffs and landings. Sieger said that has changed a bit recently as several big projects have heated up.

The current budget for the county-run facility is \$13.8 million, with \$11.2 million of the total coming from grants, according to county spokeswoman Julie Murphy.

ECONOMIC ENGINE

County Administrator Craig Coffey said the airport is a key component of the county's economic development strategy and the work transforming the facility from a "sleepy airport for just residential planes" to a more "corporate-oriented facility" was built "one project at a time."

He praises Sieger's efforts in moving projects forward.

"Adding Roy to our staff has put that on turbo speed and I think you're seeing the effect," Coffey said. "The airport is one of the cylinders in our economic engine that is going to fire Flagler County for the future."

Helga van Eckert, executive director of the Flagler County Department of Economic Opportunity, said economic development at the airport will continue to flourish, even with the decision by Aveo Engineering to scrap plans for a manufacturing plant there.

"We're fortunate that Aveo Engineering is in Flagler County," she said. "The decision to locate off the airport does not impact the overall development. The improvements continue."

Van Eckert said the county "showcases" the airport to prospects and that it is "an important asset that Flagler County can offer to businesses."

CHALLENGES OF GROWTH

While growth at the airport is welcome, it has brought some challenges. Sieger said the biggest challenge he faces is staffing.

"When I first took over this airport seven years ago, we had two more employees but the airport was not able to support those positions," he said. "Now the airport is twice as busy. My challenges are to get more staff in the future."

The airport currently has a staff of six, including Sieger.

Wacker, too, sees some challenges from growth at the airport.

"Any growth, with all the hoops you have to jump through, is good," he said. "But with that said, you have to be able to manage the smaller growth around you."

Wacker said as a small-business owner at the airport, he sometimes feels overlooked by the county's growth plans.

"Once that big snowball of growth gets going, that's great, but we also have to keep our eye on the ball about who we are and try to help the businesses in aviation grow at somewhat the same rate and that's very hard to do."

Once the current list of projects is completed in the next 12 to 18 months, Sieger said visitors to the facility won't believe their eyes.

"In a year-and-a-half, this airport will look totally different," he said.

