

## Airport provides extra draw for industry



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Thomas Hazel, president of Statesville Flying Service, veered off Lowe's Aviation Road onto a dirt road and headed toward the nearly constructed Newell Rubbermaid hangar.

After consulting with the foreman from G.L. Wilson, Hazel surveyed the seven other corporate hangars on the closed taxiway.

Rubbermaid's corporate hangar will be the eighth one to be built at the Statesville Regional Airport and is part of a growing list of clientele for Statesville Flying Service.

A number of corporations are opting to own their own planes versus flying commercially, which makes corporate aviation recruitment pretty competitive, Hazel said.

The City of Statesville is trying to capitalize on this trend, and — along with Iredell County — has made several improvements and offered tax incentives to companies to lure their planes here.

The reason is — as Greater Statesville Chamber of Commerce President David Bradley puts it — the airport generates millions in taxable revenue, and planes don't need a lot of firefighters, police or school rooms.

The value of the aircraft at the Statesville airport has increased from \$40.2 million in January 2004 to \$276 million today, according to the Iredell County 2007 Comprehensive Financial Report.

"I think this airport is one of the best examples of a public-private partnership," said Phil Hazel, vice president of Statesville Flying Service, which has managed the airport for the past 31 years. "This airport has been paying for itself for a long, long time."

The first big expansion took place after World War II when a lot of the hangars were built. But the airport didn't have another hangar expansion until 1989, when the Hazels added two more.

When Clark Equipment, later called Dana Corp., relocated to Statesville in the late 1970s, they asked the city to extend the runway from 3,500 feet to 4,000 feet. In 1989, the runway was expanded again to 5,000 feet.

When Lowe's Companies Inc. wanted to move its corporate aviation division to Statesville, the city and county paid to have the runway extended from 5,000 feet to 7,000 feet and put two instrument landing approach systems into place. The federal government has contributed millions in grant money as well.

"Every time the city made an investment out here, it grew," Phil Hazel said. "Lowe's was the biggest new arrival."

Dale Earnhardt Inc. was the first corporation to lease land from the city and build its own hangar at the Statesville airport.

After that, Greg Biffle, Michael Waltrip Racing, Nelson Sigmon, JR Motorsports and Gillett Evernham Motorsports built their own hangars.

Now that all the corporations at the airport are upgrading to regional-sized jets, government officials are investing in a runway overlay to protect the asphalt from cracking under the pressure of the larger plane's.

In addition to the government officials' helpful attitudes, pilots prefer Statesville Regional because it's quick to get in and out, said Greater Statesville Development Corporation Director Michael Smith. Unlike Concord, Statesville pilots fly in and out under the direction of air traffic controllers in Atlanta, not Charlotte's.

"People in the aviation industry see that as key," Smith said.

Smith said the airport has two 90-acre industrial sites adjacent to it, which make it a prime location for aerospace manufacturers.

"There are not that many airports that have that combination," Smith said.

Statesville Airport Commission Chairman Steve Johnson said the city and the county have to continue to invest in the airport in order to create positive cash flow.

"I think you're going to see bigger things out there yet," he said. "I think the opportunity is out there."

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