



Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission

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NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release

March 15, 2007

New Runway Surface Just Another Positive Step for Robert S. Kerr Airport

OKLAHOMA CITY – Poteau’s Robert S. Kerr Airport is experiencing a renaissance of sorts lately. There’s a newly remodeled terminal to welcome visitors and a new hangar or two has been added to accommodate the increased number of aircraft based at the airport.

But the one improvement that ties all of these projects together is the recent strengthening of the airport’s runway surface, which has allowed a wider variety of planes to land at the airport.

Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission staff recently visited the airport to inspect the work that was performed on the runway, which included overlaying the existing runway with a new layer of asphalt. The total cost of the project was nearly \$1.3 million, which was paid through a combination of local, state and federal funds. A large portion of those funds – more than \$393,000 – was provided by the Commission in the form of a grant through its Capital Improvement Program (CIP).

The CIP provides funding to Oklahoma airports for various capital needs, such as runway rehabilitation and construction; installation of navigational aids; land purchases; and installation and repair of airfield lights and signage.

“The Robert S. Kerr Airport plays a vital role in the economic prosperity of eastern Oklahoma,” Commission Director Victor Bird said. “Many businesses in and around the Poteau area use the airport to conduct business. Mayor Jeff Shockley and other city and airport officials have done a great job of transforming the airport into an inviting and accommodating destination for today’s business traveler. We look forward to working with them on other future projects.”

The need for a stronger runway at Robert S. Kerr Airport was virtually unknown until nearly two years ago when a sinkhole formed on the airport’s taxiway. That pavement failure forced airport and city officials to test the strength of the runway. The test results verified what they had feared – the runway surface was also weak. Airport officials then began limiting access to the airport’s runway to just local aircraft until the problem could be corrected.

“We were basically closed for about two years except for our local pilots,” Shockley said. “Our runway is probably not back to 100 percent just yet, but we will probably need another strengthening in about two years.”

As bad as the sinkhole and weakened runway were for the city’s airport, there was a silver lining in all that had happened.

Many of Poteau residents had no idea where the airport was located before the sinkhole formed, even though they could see airplanes coming in and out of the city, Shockley said. But that soon changed once the airport hosted the city's inaugural balloon festival shortly thereafter. The balloon festival allowed many of Poteau's 8,300 residents to see the airport up close and personal for the very first time.

“(The balloon festival) exposed our airport to lots of people. And now the public is really aware of where we are and what we're doing out here. The public support of improvements has grown tremendously,” Shockley said.

Shockley said the Poteau airport has done wonders for the city and the surrounding communities by creating economic development opportunities and bringing in more tourism dollars.

“People began using the airport with some heavier planes than what we were allowing for a short period,” he said. “We're now selling Jet-A fuel that we weren't selling before because of the restrictions on the runway. People come in and just stop, maybe take the courtesy car, see the town or area and stay a day or two, load up and leave. It's a big impact, especially economic development wise.”

Airport Manager Ellis Whigham has seen activity at the airport increase significantly during the past few years. He estimates the number of takeoffs and landings average about 250 per month.

Currently, there are 28 aircraft that are based at Robert S. Kerr Airport, including airplanes that belong to companies such as Southern Star, Dick Moore Farms, Thompson Properties, Elite Trailers and Jim Mixon Agency. Planes belonging to several local attorneys and car dealers also call the airport home. Although they do not have any airplanes based at the Poteau airport, the Choctaw Nation and Kelworth Trucking make frequent stops at the airport in company planes.

Whigham is hopeful that one day soon, the Poteau airport will be able to extend its runway from its current length of 4,000 feet to 5,000 feet to accommodate jet traffic.

“If we add another 1,000 feet to the runway, I am sure we'll see a lot more activity. It's not because they can't get in on 4,000 feet, but a lot of the insurance companies won't let them land on less than that,” Whigham said.

In anticipation of extending its runway in the near future, the City of Poteau has already purchased 92 acres of land adjacent to the airport. A new connecting taxiway is also planned.

“The way the airport is growing has been a big asset for the city. We have a lot of support from city hall, city council and local business people,” Shockley said. “And I would like to thank Director Bird and the Commission staff for helping us, being patient with us and guiding us to get done what needed to be done. We really appreciate their efforts.”

The Oklahoma Aeronautics Commission's mission is to promote aviation, which includes fostering the growth of the aerospace industry and ensuring the needs of commerce and communities across Oklahoma are met by the State's air transportation system comprised of 114 public airports.