



Aerospace & Aviation is Part of Rockford's Economic Future

by Tom Austin

The aerospace and aviation industry sectors play a vital role in several Rockford metro area industries. Known for manufacturing, the Rockford area has recognized their importance and increased investment in the aerospace and aviation sectors. These investments have led to a growth in aerospace manufacturing and a community partnership to support and expand this sector.

The community has also rallied around the development and expansion in the Transportation sector. The Chicago Rockford International Airport is an important hub for United Parcel Service and is one of the nation's busiest cargo airports. An increase in the accessibility to local passenger travel allows the Rockford region to fly both domestically and internationally, which has benefited the area's Leisure-Hospitality industry.

The movement of people and products through Rockford, along with the manufacturing of key systems for those airliners, are part of the economic growth of the Rockford region.

Manufacturing

While the Manufacturing industry overall has experienced a decline in employment, the Rockford area aerospace manufacturing sector is expanding. The news media has noted in several articles that companies manufacturing and assembling aerospace products have expanded employment and production in the Rockford area. Woodward, a manufacturer of control systems, is building an additional \$300 million manufacturing campus and will be expanding employment by 1,000 to

meet its future production demands. GE Aviation, another Rockford area company, is increasing building space as it grows its production for systems for private and corporate aircrafts. B/E Aerospace’s Rockford Aircraft EcoSystems, a company grown at the local incubator EIGERlab and funded by B/E Aerospace, expanded its facilities at the Chicago Rockford International Airport in 2011 with a \$4 million, 38,000-square-foot building. Aerospace manufacturing and aerospace suppliers are leading the manufacturing sector growth in the Rockford metro area.

Transportation & Leisure-Hospitality

The Transportation sector has also benefited from the investment and

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Annual Projected Growth Rate of Aerospace & Aviation Related Industries Compound Growth Rate (2010 to 2020)



expansion of aviation in the Rockford region. While the aviation industry has experienced its ups and downs in both cargo transportation and passenger traffic, the Chicago Rockford International Airport has continued to invest in attracting aerospace and aviation companies to the airport. Its recent investment includes attracting maintenance, repair, and overhaul operations (MROs) by expanding its facilities and building and developing a workforce to staff those companies. Working with educational providers to build a talented aviation repair workforce, the airport strives to bring in repair facilities to the region.

In addition, the Chicago Rockford International Airport is planning an expansion of its terminal to handle more passenger traffic following several years of passenger traffic growth. The terminal expansion is only the most recent investment in the aviation infrastructure at the airport. Attracting passenger traffic to Rockford has meant working with airlines to offer destinations that attract passengers to fly from Rockford. This has not been an easy task since Rockford is located within a short drive of Chicago O'Hare International airport, one of the world's busiest airports, and another low cost alternative is in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Making the airport easy to use and a less expensive option has been one way Rockford has increased its passenger traffic. Airline passengers are drawn from the region, which helps increase tourism in the Rockford area. The aerospace and aviation industry attracts tourists and workers to the region.

Educational Pipeline

Rockford is seeking to build an educational system to support the long-term expansion of the aerospace and aviation industries. Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, a nationally known education institution, has built a presence in Rockford. Embry-Riddle offers training in both aviation and aerospace and has allowed workers in the aerospace industry additional educational opportunities. When the school was contemplating building a new campus, the Rockford area worked to be selected as the new site. Businesses and residents developed a fund to offer scholarships for students to attend the Rockford campus, if it was built. Embry-Riddle eventually decided not to build another campus, but the experience demonstrated that the Rockford region recognized the importance of this industry.

Rock Valley College, an important local education and training institution,

is also part of the community's effort to build a trained workforce for the aerospace and aviation industries. The college is working on expanding its aviation repair training to help the Chicago Rockford International Airport grow its MRO capacity. In addition, Rock Valley College is planning to expand its career preparation programs to help individuals to better prepare for changing occupational demands. The region's post-secondary schools help train workers for the aerospace and aviation sectors.

The Rockford area recognizes that it needs to build its own training workforce for the aerospace and aviation industries. The Midwest is not necessarily a place that attracts workers from other areas in the United States. One local employer pointed out that workers in this region are usually local and attracting skilled workers from outside the Midwest would not fill all the workforce needs. Aerospace



education was included in the new high school redesign in the Rockford School District. Collaborating with aerospace educator Embry-Riddle and local businesses, the school district has adopted the aerospace career pathway in its new academy program. The aerospace classes offered by the Rockford School District allow the students to earn college credit and would offer high school students an introduction into careers in this growing Rockford industry. Preparing the workforce of tomorrow will aid local efforts to attract additional aerospace companies and supply workers for existing local aerospace companies.

Competing Nationally

Economic development helps communities expand employment opportunities for its residents by attracting new employers and building on their existing strengths. The Rockford area has recognized its national and international role in aerospace production and has sought to

develop on that position. The Boeing Company recently contemplated moving production of its new airliner out of Washington State as part of its union negotiations. The Rockford area brought together its economic development team, local workforce board, aerospace employers, local governments, and other partners to offer a proposal to attract Boeing to Rockford. In the end, Boeing resolved its union issues and did not relocate production out of the state. While Rockford did not attract Boeing to Rockford, state officials said that the Rockford alliance was in the top 5 finalists. This standing has emboldened the partnership and has led to hope to attract another aerospace-related employer to the area.

Why would Boeing locate a production plant in the Rockford region? The area has a long history of possessing workers with a strong work ethic and skills to help employers be productive. A solid base of internationally known

aerospace companies and manufacturing companies are part of the aerospace supply chain. The community has continued to make investments in its airport to attract cargo and build passenger traffic. In addition, the airport has built on its increased aviation traffic to attract aviation maintenance companies. To ensure a prepared workforce the airport, educational providers, and the Rockford school district have teamed with businesses to build a prepared skilled workforce to meet the needs of the aerospace and aviation industries. Partnerships have worked to build, retain, and attract aerospace companies to make Rockford the aerospace region that it is.

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