VISION MOVES FORWARD

GTP vision takes giant step forward as Spirit AeroSystems lands

The notion of the North Carolina Global TransPark in Kinston as an economic engine for eastern North Carolina is becoming reality nearly two decades after it was conceived and proposed by aviation-economy expert and Kenan Institute director John D. Kasarda.

The recent announcement that Spirit AeroSystems Inc. will locate there also offers a significant boost to the state’s burgeoning aerospace cluster.

Spirit AeroSystems is the world’s largest independent supplier of commercial airplane assemblies and components. In May, the Kansas-based company announced plans to open a manufacturing plant at the GTP that will call for investment of more than $570 million and the creation of 1,031 jobs over six years. State grants from the One North Carolina Fund and Job Development Investment Grant program and a grant from the nonprofit Golden LEAF to the Global TransPark Authority helped make the project possible.

Building a new economy

The aerospace giant’s choice of GTP for its project is a major step forward for the park and fulfills the vision conceived when North Carolina leaders first launched the GTP project as an economic development solution for the eastern part of the state.

“Spirit AeroSystem’s expansion to the GTP is one of the largest single aerospace investments in North Carolina,” Kasarda says. “It is part of the transformation of eastern North Carolina from a low-wage, tobacco-driven economy to a higher-wage economy based on new and developing industries.”

Kasarda’s concept was to create an “aerotropolis” — an air cargo industrial complex with supporting businesses surrounding the park that would attract companies in high-value industries that have time-critical manufacturing needs, such as aerospace, pharmaceuticals and medical instruments. The need to build infrastructure to support the complex would create additional jobs and further strengthen the economies of the communities in the region.

As a result of Kasarda’s presentation to state leaders in 1991, then-Governor Jim Martin created the North Carolina Air Cargo Authority, which began the process of feasibility studies, site selection and environmental impact studies to create a global aviation park. Kinston was selected as the park site in 1993 and the work of building the GTP and attracting businesses began.

Today, the GTP comprises 2,400 acres near most of the state’s major military bases and is convenient to major ports, interstate highways and rail connections. The on-site Kinston Regional Jetport boasts the longest civilian runway in the state. Thirteen tenants employ nearly 1,500 people and include Henley Aviation Pilot Flight Training Center; Longistics, the foreign-trade-zone operator and cargo-delivery logistics company; and the headquarters for Commerce Overseas Corporation, a leading military aviation-parts
manufacturer and supplier, with its warehouse, distribution center and manufacturing facility.

**Becoming an industry leader**

The commercial aerospace cluster is a major target of state economic development efforts because of North Carolina's existing assets and its potential for growth.

The state already boasts the latest technology in the manufacture of cutting-edge aircraft with HondaJet located in the Piedmont Triad region; GE engine-production facilities in Durham and Wilmington; and the world headquarters for Goodrich Aerospace, one of the largest manufacturers of aircraft parts in the world, located in Charlotte. The arrival of Spirit AeroSystems at GTP supports this ongoing positioning of North Carolina as a leader in the commercial aerospace manufacturing industry.

"Having Spirit AeroSystems come to the GTP in Kinston is transformational," says Kinston businessman and GTP board member John McNairy, who also serves on the Kenan Institute's board of trustees. "It will serve as an anchor of an aerospace industry cluster at the GTP and will lead North Carolina into the 21st century as a leader in the industry."

McNairy likens the arrival of Spirit AeroSystems to DuPont's location of the first industrial polyester plant in the world in Kinston in the 1950s. "People from all over the country came to Kinston and opened the city's world view. It 'raised the ship' for everyone in the town, creating better schools, increasing community involvement and diversifying the culture."

McNairy believes the arrival of Spirit AeroSystems will have a similar effect, not only in Kinston but across the state, as North Carolina's traditional industries of textiles, tobacco and furniture continue their decline.

Spirit will build one of five major parts of the Airbus A350 Jumbo Jet in Kinston and transport the finished product to the nearby Port of Morehead City, where it will travel by sea to France. Each of the other main components are being built in different countries, then shipped to France for assembly. "It really is an exciting global effort," McNairy says.