

TAKING FLIGHT

AIRCRAFT MANUFACTURERS ARE FINDING THAT BREVARD COUNTY HAS JUST THE RIGHT MIX OF LABOR AND LAND TO FUEL THEIR GROWTH PLANS.

by Kevin Fritz

When the Brazilian-based aircraft manufacturer Embraer lands at Melbourne International Airport in 2010, it will join a host of other small aircraft manufacturers that have found the airport and Brevard County to be ideal places to do business.

Its new neighbors, Evektor from the Czech Republic and local Liberty Aerospace, have already recognized the value of setting up shop on the Space Coast.

Brevard County has become a hotbed for the builders of business and pleasure aircraft. And those builders aren't alone. The county boasts a thriving manufacturing sector. While manufacturing makes up 8 percent of the state's overall economy, Brevard's number is closer to 16 percent.

"We have 100 percent more manufacturing going on [by percentage in Brevard]," says Lynda Weatherman, president and CEO of the Economic Development Commission of Florida's Space Coast.

Weatherman adds that being home to one of the largest suppliers of avionics, industry giant Rockwell Collins doesn't hurt. In addition, because of the high-tech allure of the space program and its supply chain, the county has the necessary labor-skill mix to accommodate aircraft manufacturers. There's plenty of land, too. "It creates the perfect storm," says Weatherman.

Lori Booker, spokesperson for Melbourne International, agrees that small-plane manufacturers choose the airport as home base because of the high-tech avionics expertise and employment base in the area, especially with the looming

NASA layoffs expected to occur when the shuttle program eventually ends.

"The talent base will be even deeper," she says, looking toward the future.

As a result, small-aircraft manufacturing has become big business, one that is growing — not shrinking — in the current down economy. Katie Pribyl, director of communications for the Washington, D.C.-based General Aviation Manufacturers Association, says the business side of aircraft manufacturing has been growing for the past three years. Her statistics show 1,138 business jets shipped in 2007 nationwide, an increase of 28 percent from 2006. Also, sales were up 41 percent in the first quarter of 2008 compared to the first three months of 2007.

Embraer will have made a \$41.3 million capital investment when all is said and done plus added 200 jobs paying an average of \$50,000 annually, another boost to the local economy. Weatherman points out that the average annual salary in the county is currently approximately \$39,000.

The 15-acre project marks the debut of Embraer-Empresa Brasileira de Aeronautica SA in the United States. The company will focus on making two small jets, the Phenom 100 and 300. Embraer's emergence into the Very Light Jet (VLJ) market, described by Weatherman as a relatively new phenomenon in aircraft manufacturing, has been well received worldwide.

Embraer will not only manufacture the planes, but it will also have a showroom, likely attracting wealthy buyers from across the world, which also has its benefits. "[Buyers] will probably be coming in for three days. We will get to show off Florida, the county and Melbourne," Weatherman says.

Liberty Aerospace began operations in 2000 and recently completed an expansion of its MIA facility to 52,193 square feet. Now, even more growth is planned. Unlike Embraer, which specializes in commercial and executive

aviation, Liberty fills the sports aircraft niche, manufacturing smaller planes, specifically the two-seat XL-2, which holds not much more than the occupants and their golf bags. Liberty employs approximately 130 workers.

Evektor Aircraft is a start-up that the Space Coast EDC helped cultivate and continues to assist. The company, known for the lightweight SportsStar SL aircraft, plans to sell the planes for approximately \$140,000 each throughout North and South America. Flight schools are drawn to them because of the price and low maintenance. The manufacturer, part of Evektor-Aerotechnik of Kunovice in the Czech Republic, plans to add more than 50 jobs in Brevard County in the next two years at salaries exceeding \$50,000.

The county's popularity with small-aircraft manufacturers is one reason the EDC worked tirelessly toward sponsoring an export trade mission to the Dubai Air Show last November. With the help of a grant from Enterprise Florida, the marketing effort was designed to create business from foreign buyers for local aircraft-related companies. Representatives from five companies were able to come away with potential orders, according to Weatherman. Liberty Aerospace was the big winner, securing an order for 30 training aircraft.

"There's interest in finding overseas markets in order to expand and create new jobs," she says, citing one of the EDC's primary goals when introducing local companies to international trade, which is to open the doors for new foreign trade opportunities.

Those foreign companies, in turn, increasingly are looking to Brevard — and liking what they see.

AT A GLANCE

Brevard County

Population: 531,250

2010 Projected Population: 586,500

Current per Capita Income: \$27,762

Square Miles: 1,276

Municipalities: Barefoot Bay, Cape Canaveral, Cocoa, Cocoa Beach, Grant, Indian Harbor Beach, Malabar, Melbourne, Melbourne Beach, Merritt Island, Mims, Palm Bay, Port St. John, Rockledge, Satellite Beach, Scottsmeer, Sharpes, Titusville.

County Info: 321.633.2000;

www.countygovt.brevard.fl.us.