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Editorial

O'Hare connection will help Rockford grow

ROCKFORD REGISTER STAR

Strap yourself in. Chicago/Rockford International Airport is seeing dizzying growth in cargo.

The airport authority has signed a deal with two Chicago-area companies to develop and build on as many as 33 acres of prime land near the United Parcel Service facility, and near one of the airport's two runways. The construction could start as early as this fall with \$10 million in improvements and a 70,000-square-foot building.

Eventually, up to 450,000 square feet of cargo space could be developed, compared with the 620,000 square feet being used now, mostly by UPS.

It's a big deal — one that could position Rockford nicely for the need created when the massive expansion of O'Hare International Airport gets rolling. Cargo operations will be looking for some way — any way — to avoid the mess.

Actually, O'Hare is enough of a headache already for cargo businesses, as explained by Mike Dunn, chairman of the airport authority, and airport Executive Director Bob O'Brien in a meeting last week with the Editorial Board.

One business Rockford officials have been courting, Polar Air Cargo, has to allow four hours for "staging" its cargo, or taxiing on the runway, unloading and reloading. Yes, the congestion is that bad at O'Hare. At Rockford, on the other hand, there would be no hassles, no waiting.

You avoid Chicago; you get the job done in half the time or a lot less. For a cargo business, what's not to like?

What's not to like for the Rockford community, as well?

"This is economic development. This is jobs. This is huge," Chairman Dunn told the Editorial Board. When the project is done, in five to 10 years, Bob O'Brien says, the airport could make almost \$600,000 in revenue.

The best part is that the risk to taxpayers is minimal. After heavy pressure from two airport board members — and after buzz that other developers were interested — Tandem Development Group of Hoffman Estates agreed to pick up the tab for site work and construction, agreed to attract tenants and to pay rent on the property. (The contractor is Leopardo Construction, also of Hoffman Estates.) For the other piece, connecting the runway to the cargo facilities, the Federal Aviation Administration may pay the cost.

Only if that doesn't happen would the airport have to sell \$15 million in bonds to pay for the ramps for runway access. And even then, the long-term investment would be wise.

From 60 miles away, not even a blink of the eye in flight time, Rockford is in a perfect position to capitalize on O'Hare's growing pains, which could last for nine more years.

Since the spring, Rockford airport officials have been talking to Polar Air, a cargo carrier that is one of O'Hare's largest. The company's interest reinforces what the numbers already show: According to preliminary figures from the FAA, Rockford ended 2006 as the 21st largest cargo airport in the country, a step up from 25th in 2005.

It's hard to believe that just five years ago, the airport had no passenger business — and few people foresaw that cargo would be such a ticket to growth.

Now, thanks to big numbers from the FAA and big deals in the offing, cargo is on everyone's radar screen. O'Hare, get ready to rumble with Rockford.