

Williston Economic Development
by Barbara Peterson

A new state of the art airport will put Williston on the map. The City is planning to build a \$250 million airport to accommodate the growing needs of the residents in northeastern Montana and northwestern North Dakota.

The executive director of Williston Economic Development says the new Williston Basin International Airport (WBIA) will be a beacon for a mix of economic development projects.

"Transportation infrastructure has always been a key component for sound economic growth. I am willing to bet we are going to see some unique business development inquiries as a result of this," said Shawn Wenko.

The WBIA will be located on approximately 1,500 acres about five miles northwest of Sloulin Field. The modern airline facilities will provide much needed services and reinforce Williston's important role in the oil patch.

"This is one more piece in place that establishes Williston as a regional hub for economic activity in western North Dakota," said Wenko.

The project will begin as early as this winter pending federal approval. The Williston Airport manager said they could begin purchasing land, finalizing terminal designs and preparing for the bidding process. If all goes as planned, the WBIA could be up and running in the middle of 2018.

The actual abandonment of the original airport site provides a unique opportunity for economic development. The 900 acres are located perfectly in the center of Williston. An Arizona firm has been selected to master plan the development. Cardon Development Group will work cooperatively with City of Williston officials moving forward.

"Right now, our focus is on the redevelopment of the old property once it has been decommissioned," said Wenko. "The goal is to conduct the planning now. On the day the Sloulin Field property is decommissioned, bulldozers can immediately start developing what is undoubtedly going to be the 'Showcase' piece for this community."

The airport relocation project started in 2011 at a time when Sloulin Field, and all of Williston, was experiencing skyrocketing growth due to extensive oil and gas activity. Once it became clear the current airport couldn't grow anymore, airport and city leaders began searching for a new site.

"It's extremely uncommon to move an airport. Usually it's far more feasible to do an expansion," explained Williston Airport manager Steven Kjergaard. "Our location just wasn't expandable because of the hill to the northwest and terminal constraints. We just couldn't grow effectively here."

While rampant development of the Bakken Shale Oil and Gas Play created a need for improved airline facilities and services; the decline in crude prices hasn't stalled growth, but it has made it more manageable.

"The growth in the oil industry drove us to look at expansion, but the fact is, we are still growing for the year. We aren't growing at an insane rate, but we are growing," said Kjergaard.

Wenko echoes Kjergaard's assessment of Williston's economy.

"Despite the uncertainty in crude oil prices, we are still experiencing tremendous interest in the Sloulin Field Redevelopment project," said Wenko. "We were on a trajectory that was exciting, but not sustainable. You cannot build a vibrant city when rental costs are the highest in the country. We are still growing; but at a reasonable rate."

The Environmental Assessment and associated documents compiled by KLJ will be open for public comment until Saturday, Sept. 19. The files are available for review at City Hall, the Williston Community Library, the Airport Manager's office and online. If there are no significant comments, the EA will go to the Federal Aviation Administration for final authorization.

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