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Aerotropolis may finally take flight in Wayne County

Ypsilanti — It had the name Aerotropolis, 60,000 empty acres and important backers, but the plans for development between Wayne County's two airports sputtered under the crush of a slumping economy.

Today, the project has a new name, a soon-to-be-finished marketing strategy, a motivated CEO and board of directors and a growing list of businesses that have begun to move into the vacant land. Supporters say that will bring thousands of new jobs and housing development during the next decade.

Renamed VantagePort, backers hope the marketing plan for the seven-town area will attract business development from around the world and make the region a significant transportation hub, since it is near rail, highways and two airports. This time, organizers insist, efforts won't stall.

Landing development

These are the seven development "nodes" in the new VantagePort project - formerly known as Aerotropolis - that will target specific businesses in selected areas ranging from an advanced technology corridor to a business park and logistics center.



"We want revitalization and new growth in our areas for the right businesses that will bring people into our communities and increase our tax base and be a place where people want to come," said Verna McDaniel, the top administrator for Washtenaw County and president of the VantagePort board. "We can do that if we market ourselves and allow others in different countries to grow their businesses — high-tech businesses, green businesses. We feel that we're perched to do it."

"Aerotropolis," or "airport city" as it was referred to when first promoted in 2009, is a generic term that has become synonymous with developments near airports that make it easy for suppliers to serve customers through road, rail and air connections.

Local supporters, who touted creating 60,000 jobs, thought it was simple economics: Place logistical firms with access to modes of transportation that include Detroit Metropolitan and Willow Run airports, and commerce and housing development would follow.

Although companies such as General Electric put a \$117 million research and development center in Van Buren Township as part of Aerotropolis and a few other firms have followed, the project didn't take off as proponents had hoped. That prompted the creation in July of VantagePort with a nine-member board and a seven-member executive committee to oversee a \$600,000 budget.

Tim Keyes, the VantagePoint CEO who was also the longtime economic development director in Romulus, said the name change and concept upgrade was done "to make ourselves stand out amongst the others who call themselves Aerotropolis."

"As part of our brand, and as part of our story, we have a strong infrastructure system in highways, the railroads and the airports," Keyes said. "We have a world-class transportation system. It's the airports, the rail and the highways. It is adjacent to an international border. We're different than anybody else."

Each of the seven communities — Romulus, Taylor, Belleville, Ypsilanti and Ypsilanti Township, Van Buren Township and Huron Township — pay VantagePort \$25,000 annually to market and help bring development to their communities. Wayne and Washtenaw counties pay \$50,000 every year.

The Wayne County Airport Authority, which runs Willow Run and Detroit Metropolitan Airport, created a \$150,000 marketing fund for a research and development center at the Willow Run Airport.

Targeting Development

Each township or city would have different goals of what to attract, Keyes said. At least seven “nodes,” as VantagePort officials call them, are being formed to target specific development, ranging from an advanced technology corridor to business park to a logistics center.

“This was rolled out right at the height of the recession,” Keyes said of the past efforts. “It’s had its struggles just because of when all the communities and the counties actually formed all this.” But, he said, good things have occurred, too, such as GE and Lee Steel moving into the area.

But the plan has its critics. Jarrett Skorup, a research associate at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy in Midland, said organizers “can change the name, but using taxpayer money to try and determine the next big thing in an economy by picking winners and losers in the marketplace is still bad public policy.”

“If Aerotropolis or VantagePort is a good idea, it should be done with private investment. Backing it with taxpayer dollars risks it becoming just another example of the government’s bad history of trying to pick economic winners at the expense of everyone else,” Skorup said. “At the same time, politicians get to claim predictions of 60,000 jobs (in this case) with no apparent negative effects to them when they are wrong.”

Government needs to get out of the “selective subsidy game,” he said.

But Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano, who has been talking up the project for years and pushed for the legislation signed by former Gov. Jennifer Granholm in December 2010, disagrees. The project is about jobs and tax incentives needed to be in place to do that, he said.

Ficano said he understands “they wanted to change the name and distinguish it from other aerotropolises, which is fine.” But the concept still revolves around “airport logistics which is the low-hanging fruit and it expands on out” into other areas, he said.

Ficano pushed back at critics of the project’s slow progress.

“As the airport develops and the global economy keeps taking hold, they will continue to expand. I don’t know what people expect, but these type of developments usually take years,” he said.

‘Infrastructure’s There’

One company executive who sees the project’s potential is James Linton, the chief operating officer of W.F. Whelan Co., a logistics company that imports and exports goods around the world. His company was once in the Aerotropolis area in Romulus but recently moved to expand its operations in Canton Township.

Linton said the company “certainly would want to be a part of” VantagePort in the future and is keeping track of the effort’s progress “so that we can figure out how we can become more involved.” But realizing the success, he said, is going to take time.

“We’d like to get something there eventually,” Linton said. “I think the advantages for the VantagePort is obviously the airport. You are dealing with one of the better airports in the nation from a service perspective. You have the interstates. The infrastructure’s there. You’ve already got industry within there from a logistics, transportation manufacturing perspective. The municipalities joined in. I think you’ve got the right players agreeing and working.”

Rick Sollars, the newly elected mayor of Taylor and VantagePort board member, said he is always asked about the former Aerotropolis project. Now, he said, there’s a story to tell.

“We have to look for vehicles like VantagePort to attract global, national type of opportunities so we’re not fighting with our neighboring communities to attract economic development,” he said.