

2.34 Economic Development – Immokalee Regional Airport

A. Introduction & Background:

In accordance with the Letter of Understanding between Collier County and the Florida Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the Evaluation & Appraisal Report is required to evaluate the degree to which the industrial park and foreign exchange zone located at the Immokalee Regional Airport property have achieved economic benefits for the Immokalee Area.

The airport is located on a 1,100-acre tract of land in the northeast portion of the current Immokalee Urban Area. The airport is approximately one (1) mile from the central business district of Immokalee. Primary access to the airport is via County Road 846, which intersects with the airport entrance road (Airpark Boulevard), approximately ½ mile east of SR 29.

The Immokalee Regional Airport was one of many Florida airports developed by the U.S. Army Air Force during World War II. The County received title to the Airport from the Federal Government in 1960. Little development of the airport facilities has occurred since that time.

The airport contains both landside and airside facilities. Landside facilities include aircraft storage hangars, and fueling facilities. Airside facilities include three 5,000 linear-foot runways (each 150 feet wide), taxiways. The airport's operational capability is second only to the Naples Airport, in relation to other County Airports.

Only a relatively small portion of Immokalee Regional Airport is actually used for airport operations. Large areas of land are available for future airport development, or development of other land uses that could economically benefit the Community in the event that surplus acreage were to be designated by the BCC and approved by the FAA.

Currently, the airport property (which appears on both the Immokalee and Countywide Future Land Use Maps) has an industrial use designation, both in the Immokalee Area Master Plan (see Section 1.5.J of this report) and the Collier County Land Development Code (LDC). A portion of the Airport property has been leased to a private interest for the operation of a drag racing venue and associated campground. Currently, these uses are under a Temporary Use Permit, however the private lessee and the Collier County Airport Authority (which operates all County-owned airports) are seeking to convert these uses to permanent features. Doing so would require an amendment to the Immokalee Area Master Plan.

B. Identification of Specific Goals, Objectives & Policies:

As noted above, the Airport appears (as an Industrial District) on both the Immokalee and Countywide Future Land Use Maps. However, the Airport Boundary reflected on the

Countywide Future Land Use Map is incorrect and should be corrected as part of the EAR-based amendments.

In addition to the Future Land Use Maps, reference to the Immokalee Regional Airport appears in the following Elements of the Collier County Growth Management Plan.

Transportation Element OBJECTIVE 11:

The County shall maintain County owned airport facilities as attractive, efficient, safe, and environmentally compatible facilities.

Transportation Element Policy 11.1:

The County shall incorporate by reference the Immokalee Regional Airport, Everglades Airpark, and Marco Island Executive Airport Master Plans.

Transportation Element Policy 11.2:

The Collier County Airport Authority shall determine the most cost effective and efficient means for implementing future facility plans outlined within the airport master plans.

Immokalee Area Master Plan Policy VIII.1.2:

The Community Development and Environmental Services Division and the Airport Authority shall promote the development of the Immokalee Airport and surrounding commercial and industrial areas as set forth in the Immokalee Airport Master Plan.

Economic Element Policy 1.3.7:

Collier County will support the location of business and industry in the Foreign Trade Zone located at the Immokalee Airport.

C. Data Assessment:

Currently, the Immokalee Area Master Plan (IAMP) and its Future Land Use Map designate the Airport property as “Industrial District” (ID). According to the Land Use Designation Description Section of the IAMP, the purpose of the Industrial Designation “is to provide industrial type uses including those uses related to light manufacturing, processing, storage and warehousing, wholesaling, distribution, packing houses, recycling, high technology, laboratories, assembly, storage, computer and data processing, business services, limited commercial such as child care centers, and restaurants and other basic industrial uses but not including retail, as described in the Land Development Code for the Industrial and Business Park Zoning Districts. Accessory uses and structures customarily associated with the uses permitted in this district, including offices, retail sales, and structures, which are customarily accessory

and clearly incidental and subordinate to, permitted principal uses and structures are also permitted.”

Oddly enough, the Immokalee Industrial Designation (which includes primarily the Airport property) does not have “Airport” as an allowed use. At a minimum, the Industrial Designation should be amended to recognize the airport’s existence.

As part of the current Immokalee Area Master Plan Evaluation, Collier County examined the potential to convert the airport to some other use, such as an industrial park. Unfortunately, several factors concerning the airport property act to prevent such a conversion.

1. All three County airports, including Immokalee, are general aviation airports included in the National Plan of Integrated Airport System (NPIAS). Membership in NPIAS is required for an airport to be eligible to receive federal grants under the Airport Improvement Program (AIP).
2. The Immokalee Airport property was obtained by quitclaim deed in 1960 under the Federal Surplus Property Act. The deed contains a clause that the property shall be used for public airport purposes for the use and benefit of the public. Except as provided in the following statement, the property may be re-transferred only with the proviso that any such subsequent transferee assumes all the obligations imposed by the deed. The property may not be used, sold, salvaged, or disposed of for other than airport purposes without the written consent of the FAA. The FAA will only grant consent if it determines that such can occur without materially or adversely affecting the development, improvement, operation or maintenance of the airport at which such property is located. Therefore, it appears the County, with FAA approval, could sell or lease the airport. Although the FAA has permitted and even encouraged some limited forms of privatization, such as contracting for airport management or allowing private companies to develop and lease terminals, it has, in the past, questioned the sale or lease of an entire airport to a private entity.
3. A Deed of Release, dated June 9, 1965, released the County from the “national emergency use” provision contained in the 1960 quitclaim deed, thus providing the County with the ability to use certain areas of the property for industrial purposes under long-term leasing arrangements.
4. The Immokalee Airport and Industrial Park have received grant funds through the end of FY 2002 totaling \$6,412,129. This figure represents monies received from 5 different grant agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (\$690,000), U.S. Department of Commerce (\$793,073), U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (\$750,000), Florida Office of the Governor (\$327,773), and FDOT (\$3,851,283). Any grant funds received in FY 03 would need to be added to this amount. There is a potential liability to the County for the

- repayment of the full amount of this grant money, or some portion thereof. The exact amount would have to be determined by the respective agencies.
5. The airport has 30 T-hangars that are leased on a month-to-month basis. Of the 13 property subleases, 4 are on a month-to-month basis, 2 are on a year-to-year basis, and one is pending renewal. Of the remaining 6, 4 expire between July 31, 2004 and March 31, 2008; one expires in 2025 and one in 2028. A legal opinion is needed to determine any penalties to the County for early termination of any or all of these leases. Additionally, grant funds are associated with some of the building leases.
 6. Selling the Immokalee Airport does not appear to be a feasible option; however, if the Board of County Commissioners wished to pursue this option, further research would be needed.

In an effort to identify a potential use strategy for the Immokalee Airport, Collier County staff surveyed uses at other airports located in Southwest Florida. Of course, the two most successful (and largest) airports in the Region are Southwest Florida International Airport (located near Fort Myers, in Lee County) and Sarasota-Bradenton International Airport (located in Sarasota and Manatee Counties). However, these two airports derive the majority of their profits and success from commercial airline operations. Therefore, staff also surveyed the Region's smaller airports, which derive less benefit (or none) from commercial airline operations.

The three most successful smaller airports in the Region are:

Naples Municipal Airport, Naples, Florida

Naples Municipal Airport is located approximately two miles northeast of the City of Naples downtown. The airport is owned by the City of Naples, but is managed by the independent Naples Airport Authority, established by the Florida Legislature in 1969. The Authority members are appointed by the City Council and serve four-year terms. The airport property contains approximately 732 acres and includes two runways. Runway 5/23 is 5,000 ft. x 150 ft., and Runway 14/32 is 5,000 ft. x 100 ft. The services and businesses operating at the airport include: Collier County Mosquito Control, the Collier County Humane Society, the Civil Air Patrol, four national car rental chains, a restaurant, four air charter services, a airport pilot shop, flight schools, a jet cargo business, aircraft sales, appraisal and repair services, refueling services, hangar rentals, and an air ambulance service. The Airport has recently gained a commercial commuter service.

Charlotte County Airport & Commerce Park, Punta Gorda, Florida

The Charlotte County Airport is located approximately 5 miles SE of the City of Punta Gorda, in Charlotte County. The independent Charlotte County Airport Authority manages the Airport & Commerce Park. The Authority Board of Commissioners

consists of five members, elected on a countywide basis. The Charlotte County Airport property consists of both an airport area and a commerce park area. The airport includes three runways. Runway 3/21 is 6,580' x 150'; Runway 09/27 is 5,044' x 150'; and, Runway 15/33 is 5,049' x 150'. All the runways are asphalt and equipped with lighting and safety instrumentation. Businesses and services operating at the airport include: a flight training school/charter air service, two flight training school/aircraft rental services, a cabinetmaker, a bulk propane gas storage facility, an air ambulance/air charter service, an asphalt batch plant, a restaurant, an interior decorating service, the Civil Air Patrol, a septic tank company, Charlotte County Environmental Services, Charlotte County Mosquito Control, the Charlotte County Sheriff's Office, Charlotte County Speedway, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the local chapter of the Experimental Aircraft Association, a company that sells, repairs and installs aircraft avionics, a Federal Express Distribution Center, the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission, a maker of cabinet doors and shelving, a plastic molding business, a concrete batch plant, a company that repairs, maintains, and modifies avionics, and also paints aircraft and installs aircraft interiors, along with a research and development arm for certain aircraft components, a metal fabricator, the Charlotte County/Punta Gorda MPO, a pump manufacturing company, a company that rebuilds helicopters, a heavy equipment repair/sales firm, a tool and die business, a plastic injection molding plant, a tractor and road equipment maker, an underground utility contractor, and an airside restaurant. The Commerce Park includes a foreign trade zone, central utilities, access to road and rail transportation, and advanced fiber-optic communications. The airport also conducts an annual air show. This is arguably the most successful of the Region's smaller airports.

Page Field Airport, City of Fort Myers, Florida

Page Field Airport is located on the southern edge of the City of Fort Myers. The airport is owned by Lee County and is operated by the Lee County Port Authority, consisting of the Board of County Commissioners. The airport was formerly the area's commercial airline destination and can handle very large aircraft. There are two runways: Runway 5/23 is 6,406 ft. x 150 ft., and Runway 13/31 is 4,912 ft. x 150 ft. Refueling, hangars, tie downs and powerplant repair services are available. The airport also contains businesses that offer pilot supplies, catering, a full-service restaurant, car rentals, courtesy transportation, flight schools, aircraft repairs, sales and rentals, aircraft charters, aerial tours, aviation accessories, a pilot rest area, and aircraft maintenance. There are hotels and a regional shopping center located on the airport property.

The Immokalee Regional Airport Master Plan identifies factors that support the concept of the airport becoming a future regional airline/aircraft maintenance base. The length, width and pavement strength of the runways enable them to support most of the aircraft types currently in use for General Aviation. There is also ample room for additional hangar space within the current airport operations area.

In 2000, both the Immokalee Regional Airport and the Southwest Florida International Airport received designation as a Foreign Trade Zone (FTZ). Foreign-trade zones are

designated sites, licensed by the Foreign-Trade Zones (FTZ) Board of the U.S. Department of Commerce, at which special customs procedures may be used. FTZ procedures allow duty-free export and deferral of customs duty payments on items used in domestic commerce. These benefits are intended to help American firms offset customs cost advantages available to plants abroad. FTZ activity is conducted under the supervision of the Bureau of Customs and Border Protection, Department of Homeland Security.

The FTZ designation could provide incentive for local and regional businesses to locate their air cargo operations at the Immokalee Regional Airport. In support of such activities, Airport property offers space for industrial and commercial development and warehousing related to the FTZ. These businesses could utilize turbo-prop, business jet, or small commercial airline jet services. Additionally, the combination of the airport and Immokalee's status as an agricultural production center creates the possibility of shipping fresh produce to state or national markets.

Finally, due to the Southwest Florida climate, Immokalee Regional Airport could be attractive as a flight-training center. There is sufficient runway length and land area available for such purposes.

Currently, the Immokalee Airport offers the following services: refueling, aircraft parking, a passenger terminal/lounge, minor aircraft maintenance, courtesy transportation, including courtesy vehicles for pilots' use while in Immokalee, and computerized weather forecasts.

In addition to the above, the Collier County Airport Authority has developed a number of non-airport initiatives on the property. The two most important of these have been the USDA Immokalee Incubator Support Facility and the establishment of the Immokalee Regional Raceway on Airport grounds. More recently, the Airport Authority approved construction of a 20-unit campsite for visitors to the Immokalee Area. In 1999, the Airport Authority funded a study of proposed expansion of the Immokalee Airport's 5,000 linear foot runway to 13,000 linear feet. This would enable the airport to service large jets, capable of long-distance international travel. A smaller extension to 7,000 linear feet was previously approved and funded. Neither expansion has yet taken place.

While Collier County staff was in the process of evaluating the land uses associated with the Airport, the Collier County Board of County Commissioners approved the concept of turning control of the Airport & Industrial Park over to a private developer or project management firm. The purpose of this action is to stimulate private investment in these facilities. The County has initiated national advertisement for a private management firm to manage the property. The County's Airport Authority and the Economic Development Council (EDC) have both expressed concern that the Immokalee Airport could lose eligibility for certain federal grants and loan programs, due to the "privatized" status of the Airport. The actual impact of the Board's decision remains to be seen.

More recently, two small jet-manufacturing firms expressed interest in locating at the Airport. The County and the EDC actively courted the two firms. The Airport Authority is currently in the process of considering land use changes, including possibly a Growth Management Plan Amendment, that would (among other things) allow expansion of the campground and recognize the drag racing as a permanent, permitted land use.

Finally, the Immokalee Airport was recently designated as “Florida Tradeport, Immokalee, Florida, USA.” This designation does not represent any new program or direct economic benefit to the airport. Rather, it appears to be a Marketing package promoting the benefits of the airport facilities and location.

D. Objective Achievement Analysis:

Transportation Element OBJECTIVE 11:

The unstated purpose of this Objective, and its subject policies, is to incorporate the Airport Master Plans for the three County-owned Airports (including Immokalee Regional Airport) into the County’s Transportation Element.

Transportation Element Policy 11.1:

This policy actually incorporates the Airport Master Plans for the three County-owned Airports (including Immokalee Regional Airport) into the County’s Transportation Element.

Transportation Element Policy 11.2:

This policy provides authority to the Collier County Airport Authority for managing the three airports in accordance with their Airport Master Plans.

Immokalee Area Master Plan Policy VIII.1.2:

This policy requires the Community Development & Environment Services Division to coordinate with the Collier County Airport Authority to promote the development of the Immokalee Airport and surrounding commercial and industrial areas as set forth in the Immokalee Airport Master Plan.

Economic Element Policy 1.3.7:

This policy, from the County’s recently adopted Economic Element, commits Collier County to supporting the location of new or relocated businesses in the Foreign Trade Zone at the Immokalee Airport.

E. Conclusion:

An economically successful Immokalee Airport & Industrial Park would be a boon to the residents of both the Immokalee Area and Collier County. However, previous efforts by the Collier County Board of County Commissioners, the Collier County Economic Development Council, and others to find a formula that would encourage development of the airport property have not yet born fruit. Any successful economic strategy for the Airport would appear to require the attraction of businesses that are either associated with aviation in some manner (e.g., flight schools, aircraft or aircraft parts manufacturing or repair services, air cargo operations, and/or air tour services) or, which can derive a benefit from being located near the airport (e.g., parts & equipment distributors). There also may be benefit to the Airport in promoting special events, such as airshows and or automobile racing. Such is the formula utilized by Charlotte County in achieving success at its airport.

Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions for the Airport. Additionally, the ultimate success of the Immokalee Airport & Industrial Park could depend on factors that are not directly under Airport or County control, such as:

- ❖ Whether, the proposed Interstate 75 Bypass, between Fort Myers and State Road 29 becomes a reality.
- ❖ The cost of doing business at other airports versus doing business in Immokalee.
- ❖ The degree to which larger airports, in more developed areas, are prepared to offer economic incentives to potential tenants.

F. Recommendation:

The EAR-based amendments should include an amendment to the Immokalee Area Master Plan's Industrial Designation that recognizes the Airport as a permitted use. Recently, Collier County has adopted a Countywide Economic Incentives Package that includes specific provisions for the Immokalee Area. This package should be adopted by reference in the County's Economic Element, and these incentives should be included in any marketing campaign relative to the Immokalee Airport.