

Palwaukee proposes revamp for light jets

By Robert Channick

Special to the Tribune

Published April 17, 2006, 6:08 PM CDT

Palwaukee Municipal Airport officials plan to build a \$15 million terminal and retail center to put a new face on the 81-year-old airport and perhaps the aviation industry itself.

The proposed 8-acre development at Milwaukee Avenue and Palatine Road in Wheeling, where construction could begin this fall, may be the first in the nation designed to accommodate very light jets.

"There are moments in history where transportation makes milestones, and this may be one of them," said Palwaukee manager Dennis Rouleau. "If it happens, we're positioned to be a prime location for that type of traffic."

In production at several manufacturers, the first very light jets are expected to roll onto runways this summer. With price tags around \$1.5 million—far less than standard corporate jets—orders have been brisk for private clients and start-up charter companies hoping to launch air-taxi services.

"It's sort of like the age of George Jetson," Rouleau said. "This will be bringing personal-jet transportation to more and more people."

Last year, Palwaukee had about 135,000 takeoffs and landings, with corporate jets limited to its longest runway. Very light jets would be able to use all three runways at the airport, which is jointly owned by Wheeling and Prospect Heights.

The development would remake the southeast corner of the 420-acre airport, an area that currently is home to two small flight schools, a vacant building and a parking lot.

Given preliminary approval by the Palwaukee board last month, the Art Deco-themed proposal includes a 30,000-square-foot retail front along Milwaukee, backed by three large hangars, a combined aviation terminal and office building, a restaurant and a skydeck.

"We're basically wanting to build a premier facility at Palwaukee that will serve as a model that we can build at other airports in support of these kind of airplanes," said Matthew Schneider, president and chief executive officer of Sovereign Aviation, a Waltham, Mass., development firm.

Schneider said that although thousands of small airports have runways that will accommodate the light jets, most lack the amenities that business travelers and flight crews would want. The advent of air-taxi services, which hope to siphon off commercial business travel using fleets of very light jets, could launch mini-terminals at previously remote airfields, Schneider said.

"We're supporters of Sovereign's business model," said William Herp, president and chief executive officer of Linear Air, a Massachusetts charter service that hopes to expand with the light-jet market. "We want to see it be successful."

Linear has 30 jets on order from Eclipse Aviation in Albuquerque and expects its first delivery by year's end. Currently operating with four turboprops out of suburban Boston and New York, Linear plans to offer air-taxi service from six markets, including Chicago, within two years, with Palwaukee a front-runner for its local base, Herp said.

Guy Kemmerly, project manager for NASA's Small Aircraft Transportation System at Langley

Research Center in Virginia, said light jets could nearly double air traffic at Palwaukee within a decade, prompting one board member to question whether the proposed development may be shortsighted.

"I don't want a strip mall hiding my airport," said David Kolssak, the only Palwaukee board member to vote against the proposal. "I think Palwaukee needs to embrace the concept of this air taxi, believe in it, invest in it and go with it or not."

Although Schneider said the terminal could expand to meet demand, the project would be grounded without the retail component.

Very light jets "could be gone in five years, an experiment that didn't work out, but we've still got facilities that work well with the general aviation community that they were designed to service," he said.

rchannick@earthlink.net

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)