
Business aviation takes off

By Katie Johnston Chase

Globe Staff / January 4, 2011

BEDFORD — Business travel is bouncing back at Hanscom Field.

More corporate executives, engineers, and salespeople flew in and out of Hanscom last year, with takeoffs and landings of business jets up 7 percent compared with 2009, mirroring modest improvements elsewhere in the economy.

“We’re a barometer for what’s going on in the regional economy,” said Barbara Patzner, Hanscom Field airport director. The field, built by the US Army Air Corps before World War II, houses 79 business jets, along with 11 helicopters and 266 single-engine, twin-engine, and turboprop planes. Hanscom Air Force Base, now a research and development facility, is also there.

Business aviation is on the rise around the country, with the number of trips up about 10 percent last year, following a dismal 2009 in which operations fell by almost a third. Business travel on commercial airlines is also increasing, with business-class spending up 60 percent in the third quarter, according to American Express Business Insights, the analytics arm of the credit card company.

E-Dialog is among the local companies using Hanscom more often these days. Executives from the Burlington-based e-mail service provider chartered four trips out of Hanscom last year, double the number they went on in 2009, as revenues rebounded.

“There’s nothing like a face-to-face meeting,” said Arthur Sweetser, chief marketing officer for e-Dialog. “There’s just an urgency that requires us to be present to show that we’re resolved to fixing a problem” for a client.

The cost to hire a private jet is comparable to what e-Dialog would pay for commercial airline trips for its executives, but the time saved, Sweetser said, “hands down” makes charters a more efficient mode of travel.

E-Dialog flies on Linear Air of Concord, which has four Eclipse 500 jets at Hanscom. Linear Air’s traffic fell by half in 2009 as companies “hunkered down” and the Eclipse manufacturer went into bankruptcy, said Bill Herp, Linear president. Last year, business doubled, Herp said, and he expects 2011 to be even better as more clients turn to the smaller, less expensive jets his company flies.

Linear’s four-passenger jets, known as “very light jets,” cost companies about \$1,500 an hour to charter, compared to around \$5,000 an hour for a 10-passenger jet at Hanscom.

Business is also up at Rectrix Aviation Inc. of Hyannis — by about 15 percent — and it just opened a spacious office at Hanscom. The charter company also added a new jet to its Hanscom fleet in September and hired three additional pilots.

But with memories of the recession still fresh, clients are adopting a more frugal approach to business travel, said Richard Cawley, Rectrix president. They’re making multiple stops with a single charter, instead of flying back to Hanscom between meetings, he said, and are filling planes with more executives and salespeople since it doesn’t cost more to add passengers.

“They’re trying to accomplish a lot more on each trip,” Cawley said. “A lot of our customers, I would say they’re midsize businesses, so it’s very important for them to watch their dollars.”

Business jet travel has become more crucial for companies in the past year because of all the airline cutbacks during the recession, said Ed Bolen, president of the National Business Aviation Association. With limited or no commercial service in some communities, private jets are often the most convenient — and sometimes the only — way for companies to get to a location.

But that doesn't mean the public considers them practical. Already seen as a sign of corporate excess, business aviation was the source of great outrage in late 2008 when the heads of GM, Ford, and Chrysler showed up in corporate jets to ask Congress for a \$25 billion bailout. And there's no denying the first-class accommodations on corporate jets. On a \$35 million Gulfstream G450, business executives can conduct meetings in leather seats at a shiny conference table, wine glasses hang upside down in a kitchenette, couches fold out into beds, and the bathroom is stocked with Aveda toiletries.

But jet operators say many of their clients are midlevel managers from midlevel companies.

"I think there's a sense that it's a luxury, that it's not a necessity, that it's rock stars and fat cats that are flying around on these private jets," said Herp. "Our clients are not fat cats and rock stars, they're three business people flying to Elmira, N.Y., to close a deal."

Regardless, many companies are reluctant to talk about their jet travel. Liberty Mutual Group declined to discuss the aircraft it owns at Hanscom; the Kraft Group, EMC Corp., and Raytheon Co. did not return phone calls about the planes they keep there.

There are nearly a third more jets housed at Hanscom than just three years ago, and the air field is approaching capacity. "We have a waiting list of aircraft that want to come into Hanscom," said Thomas Kinton, executive director of Massachusetts Port Authority, which runs Hanscom.

Massport is planning to turn a ramp area into as much as 400,000 square feet of new hangar space and convert an empty 18,000-square-foot-hangar used for early aeronautical research into a facility three times its size to accommodate more jets, including bigger aircraft that can fly nonstop to China.

But local preservation groups have filed a lawsuit appealing the Federal Aviation Administration's approval of the plan, saying the historic hangar should be preserved and the increased air traffic activity will adversely affect the area, namely the nearby Minute Man National Historical Park and Great Meadows National Wildlife Refuge.

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