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Clear skies for airport tower

By Howard Roden

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Rain clouds gave way to clear skies Tuesday afternoon during a dedication ceremony for the Lone Star Executive Airport air traffic control tower, possibly foretelling the long-term impact it could have on Montgomery County.

Constructed at a cost of \$2.4 million, the tower went into full operation May 7. A number of local, state and federal dignitaries were on hand for Tuesday's ribbon-cutting ceremony to express a shared vision that the tower will serve as a catalyst for continued growth for the airport, the city of Conroe and the rest of the county.

"There are a lot of milestones associated with this airport," U.S. Rep. Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands, said. "But the opening of the control tower perhaps among its most important milestones.

"Not only does (the tower) increase air traffic safety, it creates an economic development incentive that is so critical as companies look at locating their businesses around the (Houston) region," he said. "This is going to be a critical job creation tool for Montgomery County."

Montgomery County Precinct 1 Commissioner Mike Meador equated the tower's value to the age-old argument of what comes first - the chicken or the egg.

"It (the tower) is a mighty big chicken," he said. "There'll be a lot of eggs to follow."

Tom Stinson, director of the Greater Conroe Economic Development Council, said having controlled airspace around the county airport could lure Fortune 500 companies to bring their operations adjacent to the property, as well as businesses to the city's industrial park along FM 3083.

"It's a long-term plan," he said. "The airport has become a very attractive place for company activity."

The control tower makes the airport's future "unlimited," Conroe Mayor Webb Melder said.

Nelda Luce Blair, chairwoman of The Woodlands Township board, told the crowd that the township has the largest concentration of corporate headquarters in all of Montgomery County.

"I promise we'll do our part to make use of this facility," she said.

Open for business for only 19 days, Lone Star Executive Airport has enjoyed an increase in activity, according to the tower's manager.

Robinson Aviation's Don Endsley, who oversees a staff of six traffic controllers at Lone Star, said the average number of private and commercial takeoffs and landings has increased by 40 a day to 276.

"We've had some days when the total number was as high as 430," he said. "Only the weather has reduced those numbers."

Bob Covington is the owner of General Aviation Services, the oldest "fixed-base operator" at the airport. He hasn't noticed an appreciable increase in business activity. That will change, he said, when construction on Interstate 45 is completed.

"For some people, the drive down I-45 has taken longer than the flight itself, so people found other airports" Covington said. "But when FM 3083 was connected to Texas 105, we saw an increase in tourist traffic (to the lake).

"When the freeway opens up, we'll see even more flights here," he said. "But the airspace is already managed a lot better. Things are safer, and I'm really glad it's here."

Dave Fulton, director of the Texas Department of Transportation's Aviation Division, attended the ceremony.

Ninety percent of the tower was funded by TxDOT through the Federal Aviation Administration. Montgomery County provided the remaining 10 percent on the 20-month project.

"You'll see the biggest benefit through jobs and new businesses," he said. "It's hard to attract that if you don't have a quality airport.

"You've got one here."



Lone Star Executive Airport air traffic controller Mark Wester, right, describes the function of various controls to Congressman Kevin Brady, R-The Woodlands, following the tower's dedication ceremony in Conroe Tuesday.