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Aircraft maintenance business flies into Sioux City, Iowa airport

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By Dave Dreeszen ddreeszen@siouxcityjournal.com | Posted: Saturday, January 28, 2012 10:30 pm | No Comments Posted

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Journal photo by Tim Hynds Aviation Consultant Expert Solutions' Travis Stein inspects an engine on a Saab 340A, the first aircraft to arrive at the new Sioux City maintenance and repair facility, housed in a hangar at Sioux Gateway Airport.

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Aviation Consultant Expert Solutions

Type of business: Maintenance and repair of commercial aircraft

SIOUX CITY -- Standing in the shadow of a turboprop jet Monday, Jim Sponder addressed a group of local leaders in the chilly hangar at Sioux Gateway Airport.

"I closed this facility down twice," Sponder told the small crowd, huddled around portable heaters. "There won't be a third time..."

Sponder managed aircraft maintenance facilities formerly housed in Hangar 802. After the second one, operated by commuter carrier Mesaba Airlines, closed in 2008, the more than 40 skilled aircraft mechanics scattered to different parts of the globe.

Sponder and his business partner, Travis Stein, are poised to return nearly as many, if not more of those high-paying jobs to Sioux City.

The pair recently moved their aircraft repair and maintenance business -- Aviation Consultant Expert Solutions, or ACES for short -- into Hangar 802. The fledgling company, which plans to hire 34 to start, has received a thick stack of resumes from trained mechanics around the country. Annual pay will range from \$40,000 to \$60,000.

"I've received a lot of calls from people who want to come back here," said Sponder, a graduate of Sergeant Bluff-Luton High School.

ACES facility, certified by the Federal Aviation

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Owners: Jim Sponder and Travis Stein

Address: 2500 Keokuk Ave., near Sioux Gateway Airport

Size of hanger floor: 24,000 square feet

Projected No. of initial jobs: 34

On the Web: www.top-ACES.com (currently under construction)

Administration, offers a variety of services, from routine checks to major overhauls, and specializes in serving commuter airlines operating regional jets with 30 to 100 seats.

WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE

Stein, a pilot for the last 20 years, is a former captain with Mesaba Airlines, flying connecting routes for the former Northwest Airlines into such small airports as Thief River Falls, Minn. and Detroit Lakes, Minn.

Later on, he moved into the maintenance and management side of the industry. Along the way, he performed nearly every job, from checking in

passengers to working as a flight attendant. In 2003, he received his mechanics license.

Sponder, a mechanic with more than two decades of experience, is trained to work on not only regional jets, but also larger body aircraft, including 737s, 757s and 767s.

Two years ago, while working in the Bahamas two years ago, Sponder and Stein, who had known each other for several years, started talking about forming their own maintenance business.

They began by traveling to hangars around the country to work on aircraft. They eventually tired of being constantly on the road.

"We wanted to go to one location and have our clients come to us," Stein said.

LOCAL, STATE INCENTIVES

After considering sites in Illinois and Florida, they settled on the Sioux Gateway hangar. Sponder's strong family ties in Siouxland contributed to the decision. The city of Sioux City also put together an attractive package of incentives.

"This facility was definitely the most conducive to our needs," Stein said. "We knew what kind of support we could get from the community."

ACES signed a 20-year lease with the city for the 24,000-square-foot hangar, which also includes 12,000 square feet of office and shop space. The company also will receive \$650,000 through the Targeted Jobs Program, a state incentive program that allows new or expanding divers a portion of income tax withholdings to capital expenditures. In addition, additional state funds will be available to train ACES' new hires.

Sioux City economic development director Marty Dougherty said the project qualified for a large amount of aid because the projected wages for the skilled mechanics and sales staff far exceed the Woodbury County average of about \$16 per hour. The aircraft jobs, which include full benefits, start at around \$30 per hour.

Besides the monthly \$3,500 rent for the hangar, local officials said the maintenance facility would bring added business to the airport, including higher sales of aviation fuel. The airport gets a cut of each gallon sold.

ACES selected the Sioux Gateway site at a time when it was uncertain which commercial airline would be serving the airport in the future. In November, the U.S. Department of Transportation picked American Eagle, an affiliate of American Airlines, to operate subsidized routes between Sioux City and Chicago. Eagle will replace Delta, the lone Sioux Gateway carrier, on April 3.

Stein said ACES will reach out to American in hopes of landing their local maintenance work. At the same time, ACES business plan is not dependent on any one airline. He also expressed confidence the rural Northwest Iowa site would be an attractive place for carriers.

"A lot of airlines fly their aircraft to small towns to be worked on," Stein told the group of local leaders at Monday's grand opening ceremony. "Airlines will fly aircraft wherever the maintenance is at."

Long term, Stein said ACES hopes to branch out into serving larger body aircraft. The hangar, for example, is large enough to park a 737, though the overhead door would have to stay open, with the tail

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hanging outside.

If business grows sufficiently, employment could hit around 50 by year's end, he said.

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