

Proposed runway expansion and renovation project crucial for future of 185th Air Refueling Wing

 ktiv.com/2024/03/04/proposed-runway-expansion-renovation-project-crucial-future-185th-air-refueling-wing/

SIoux CITY (KTIV) - Established in late 1946, what is now the 185th Air Refueling Wing in Sioux City started as the Air Force's 386th Fighter Squadron flying P-47 Thunderbolts.

In the 90s, the 185th was home to F-16 Falcons. The runway that the base shares with the Sioux Gateway Airport was built for the smaller, lighter aircraft. But when the 185th transitioned to a refueling wing in 2003, piloting the large KC-135s you see today, the current runway wasn't designed to handle the greater load of the aircraft.

"So when we converted in about 2003-2004, it was determined even at that time that the ramp and the runway here in Sioux City was not prepared for the weight of a KC-135," said Col. Sonya Morrison, Commander of the 185th Air Refueling Wing. "The original runway and ramp when we extended it years ago for military service was done for a lighter, more agile aircraft because we were previously a fighter wing."

"We have been operating on waivers and limited weight restrictions for many years in order to make (the runway) last as long as we could, because we knew it's a very expensive project. And we're well aware that at some point, the concrete with the ramp and the concrete on the runway was just going to need to be replaced," Col. Morrison explained. "And what we're going through now is the programming and the planning phases for replacing the entire runway, extending the runway so that we have more space for the heavier weights, and then also replacing the ramp."

The main runway at the airport, utilized by both commercial flights and the 185th Air Refueling Wing, is part of a runway rehabilitation project.

In 2022, repairs to the concrete and new runway lighting added several more years of use to the main runway.

The runway reconstruction is estimated to cost \$60 millions with the entire project estimated at \$180 million. Funding will come from several areas, including the Department of Defense, the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Biden Administration's Airport Infrastructure Grants program.

That project will replace the main runway, make the concrete thicker and extend the runway by 1,000 feet. The project also includes the ramp, overruns, taxiways and more. Each piece crucial for the future of the base.

“Because whether it’s the weight of a KC-135, or the weight and the length and the width of a KC-46, or whatever that new airplane is that the Air Force chooses to move to, we do need a newer ramp that’s larger, taxi spaces and parking places for all the airplanes,” explained Col. Morrison.



The main runway at the airport, utilized by both commercial flights and the 185th Air Refueling Wing, is part of a runway rehabilitation project. The current runway was not built for the KC-135s flown by the 185th.(Iowa Air National Guard)

This runway expansion and renovation project is critical for the 185th Air Refueling Wing, but those planes also share the runway with smaller planes for commercial flights at the Sioux Gateway Airport.

“It’s a huge undertaking, just coordination wise, there’s a lot of agencies involved on the civilian side and military side,” said Mike Collett, Assistant City Manager for the City of Sioux City. The project is in the planning phase, with construction estimated to start, at the earliest, in 2026.

“The runway is in great shape right now. We went through a rehabilitation process a year ago in Fiscal Year ‘22. And that was in the anticipation of us getting another five years and we could easily get there,” Collett said.

“We don’t want to get to a point where we are told by the FAA inspectors that come in that they say, ‘listen, the ramp, the runway, it’s no longer valid to land on’, because it’s a very scary thing,” said Col. Morrison.

“Our airplanes are quite heavy. And the last thing we want is to be notified that we have to move off before

we're prepared to replace that concrete. And so that really is a significant piece of that balancing act."

The funding for this project is coming from several different entities, but Col. Morrison and Collett say they want Siouxlanders to know, they are utilizing the funds for the project appropriately.

"We have been very diligent on making sure we use the taxpayers funding accurately and push it out as long as we can," said Col. Morrison. "But we are really coming to a point where we know if we don't replace the runway and extend the overruns. Plus replace our ramp and the hangar, we will find ourselves in a situation that we are not prepared to continue to fly this tanker or any tanker for the future."

Since transitioning to the KC-135s a few decades ago, the 185th has worked to accommodate not only their mission, but the ability and size of the runway as well.



The main runway at the airport, utilized by both commercial flights and the 185th Air Refueling Wing, is part of a runway rehabilitation project. The current runway was not built for the KC-135s flown by the 185th.(Iowa Air National Guard)

"It's a balancing act in some ways, because we have been able to make it work," Col. Morrison explained. "There might be times that we will take off and we have to land at another location to get more fuel in order to not put the restriction or the extra weight on our ramp or on the runway. And we do that because we don't want to expedite the concrete from breaking down."

Once this project begins, the 185th will have to temporarily relocate until the project is complete. During the last phase of this project in 2022, the base related to Topeka, Kansas. Col. Morrison says they are looking at bases in Omaha or Lincoln, Nebraska, closer for those who live and work full time around Sioux City.

“Our members live here,” explained Col. Morrison. “And if they work here full time, they live here in the community. So the last thing they want to do is travel a significant distance. And additionally, on the weekend, when we grow to around 1,000 Airmen, they come in from all over. And so that does impact our ability to do the training and preparation.”

The current runway is working, for now. But getting this reconstruction project completed in time is high priority.

Are we getting close? Yes, we are getting close. And what I don't want to ever see is that we are not prepared to continue our location here in Sioux City to continue to fly this mission or whatever the Air Force's mission is for the next 50 years.

In February, Sioux City Mayor Bob Scott told KTIV following a city council meeting that if this project does not happen, it could mean the city could lose the 185th Air Refueling Wing. KTIV asked Col. Morrison if this was a possibility.

WATCH: Sioux City city council moving forward on repairs to Sioux Gateway Airport runways, taxiways

“There have been runways nationally where the military has to move out unexpectedly because the FAA inspectors say this runway can no longer be flown on with the weight of what the airplanes are that we have. And that is definitely not what we want,” she said.

Col. Morrison says the partnership the 185th has with the city and the airport has been key in seeing this project gets done to ensure the longevity of the base in Sioux City. “We do have a great relationship with this entire community. And we are so appreciative of the support that we get. And we are so appreciative that we are able to come to the table and talk through to make sure that we're all working together to ensure the future of the 185th.”



A SkyWest plane takes off from Sioux Gateway Airport.(KTIV)

For the Sioux Gateway Airport, Collett says this project would impact some operations, but overall, they'd be able to utilize the second runway through much of the construction. But rebuilding the main runway to handle the larger planes of the military base also means future growth for Sioux City.

"It definitely brings opportunities because we have the the military asset portion that can be used for civilian needs," said Collett. "It definitely brings opportunities for other aircraft."

The project is still in its planning phases. The construction, once started, should last two to four years

Copyright 2024 KTIV. All rights reserved.