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Newark Air Force Base still important area employer

BY KENT MALLET • ADVOCATE REPORTER • SEPTEMBER 8, 2008

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HEATH -- Newark Air Force Base closed 12 years ago, but the site remains a key provider of high-paying, high-tech jobs, most connected to the defense industry.

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The Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority manages the Central Ohio Aerospace and Technology Center, called The Base, where more than 900 work for 19 private companies.

The former Air Force base provided about 3,000 jobs at its peak during the Cold War, but employed about 1,100 when it closed in 1996, said Rick Platt, executive director of the Port Authority.

The 428-acre Base, which includes the area previously used by Newark Air Force Base plus the growing South Campus area, someday could surpass the employment there when the base closed.

Not only could new companies build at The Base, but existing companies like Boeing might create additional jobs. Boeing's new virtual manufacturing center could help the company increase its 612-member workforce by 5 to 10 percent in 12 to 18 months.

The Port Authority markets The Base for possible future tenants, with more than 250 acres available, all but five acres on the South Campus.

"It's ready for development, with road, water, sewer, gas, electric in place," Platt said. "It improves our chances for development. We're always getting nibbles, but it's undeniable the economy is the reason we're getting less of them."

The city of Heath will build a water tower in 2009 on Seminary Road, improving water pressure to the South Campus area. The Port Authority hopes next year to extend James Parkway from Kaiser Drive to Irving Wick Drive West, with a new bridge and entranceway to the east parking lot.

"The future lies in our ability to begin building new; new construction and new facilities," Platt said.

It's important, Platt said, to tell interested companies that all the infrastructure they need already is in place, instead of telling them it will be available.

Samuel Manu-Tech, for example, experienced problems with water pressure after it moved into its facility two years ago. If it knew water pressure would be a problem, Plant Operations Manager Jim Waterman said it could have affected the company's \$13.9 million commitment.

"The water tower will be a huge plus," Mayor Richard Waugh said. "These companies have to have the



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Greg Afonien, senior systems engineer, explains the process of virtual manufacturing in Boeing's new virtual manufacturing center. (Michael Lehmkuhle, The Advocate)

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- Heath Rec Center
- Port Authority
- Windstream

- About 5 acres available
Samuel Manu-Tech
Kaiser Aluminum
Conam
- About 250 acres available
- The 428-acre Central Ohio Aerospace and Technology Center includes 350 acres owned by the Port Authority and 78 acres owned by Kaiser Aluminum.
Source: Heath-Newark-Licking County Port Authority

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infrastructure put in place. This makes it shovel-ready."

Boeing might provide new jobs without building a new facility, but by making improvements at its existing site. The company's new \$1.2 million, three-dimensional virtual manufacturing center will be unveiled Wednesday.

The new design center, which includes a huge video screen, could bring work and jobs to Heath. Boeing has the virtual manufacturing technology at only one other site -- Anaheim, Calif. The company is in the process of building one in St. Louis, as well, and might add one in Seattle.

The technology allows the company to learn how to assemble products on a computer model without actually doing the assembly. It reduces the time and cost of training, buying materials and building a new product.

"The current model is very arduous and long, and we have to build a prototype," Senior System Engineer Gregory Afonien said. "The eliminates the whole procurement cycle and cuts costs. We can cut out almost a year, depending on the design."

The virtual manufacturing center will show how to build a product, down to such details as installing screws, without ever picking up a tool.

"We actually put physics behind it," Afonien said. "We can make videos for training so operators have it and it cuts on training. Visual communication is the most positive way to learn."

Local, state and national leaders often visit The Base to stay updated on the work done there and the needs of the Port Authority to keep the site competitive.

U.S. Rep. Zack Space, D-Dover, was the most recent visitor, with Platt providing a tour that included Boeing.

"It's really got a dual role," Space said. "It's an important element in our national defense system and makes for a strong nation. And, for the region, the nature of the jobs it brings -- high tech, high-paying with good benefits when these jobs become rare."

Space said he was impressed with the level of education and sophistication needed for the jobs at The Base.

"It's a great model, a great example of the type of success public-private partnerships can bring, given the tough, economic times we're facing," he said. "Much can be learned from the cooperation in this facility."

"Boeing is developing the workforce of the future, getting students interested and educating them. There are promising opportunities in technology fields."

Kent Mallett can be reached at (740) 328-8545 or kmallett@newarkadvocate.com.

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