

TOUCHDOWN: 'The Miracle of West Bay' opens amid fanfare

Hundreds turn out to tour terminal, see first landings

May 22, 2010 01:10:00 PM

WEST BAY — Hundreds turned out Saturday for a grand opening, ribbon-cutting and tours of the new \$318 million Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, a project 12 years in the making that officials say will bring an unprecedented economic expansion to the region.

“This is absolutely a momentous occasion for Northwest Florida and the entire state,” said Gov. Charlie Crist, speaking from a raised platform on the tarmac. “It will change everything.”

Bands played, speeches were given and jets from Tyndall Air Force Base zoomed by, including a flyover by three F-15s and a “touch-and-go” along the new 10,000-foot runway by F-22 pilot and Bay County native Maj. Stephen J. Cox.

The first Southwest Airlines jet landed about 1:30 p.m. and taxied to the terminal under a rainbow of water cannons.

Britt Green, CEO and president of The St. Joe Co., the largest landowner in Northwest Florida, said opening the airport was a “once-in-a-generational event.”

“We envision a future in which this entire area is bustling with activity,” he said of hopes for the first commercial international airport to open in the United States in 15 years.

Bay High School mellophone player Kayla Francis said she will remember Saturday’s grand opening of the new airport for years to come.

“I think it’s awesome, especially getting to perform,” said Francis, a senior in the Bay High School Million Dollar Band, whose members played several tunes just prior to the touchdown of the first Southwest flight. “We helped open up the new airport.”

Crist, Green, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson, U.S. Rep. Allen Boyd, Airport Authority board Chairman Joe Tannehill, Airport Authority Vice Chairman Bill Cramer, Southwest Airlines vice president Bob Montgomery and others gathered to hold an official ribbon-cutting for the airport before a large crowd.

Scores of people drove in for the day-long ceremony, forcing many to walk as much as a half-mile to the site, while others waited for shuttles. Airport spokeswoman Amy Ausley said 5,000 tickets were snapped up in the days prior to the event, forcing the printing of 2,500 more.

'You never gave up hope'

Tannehill called the airport "the miracle of West Bay" and "a labor of love" and thanked those in attendance, including public officials and the general public. "You never gave up hope," he said.

Nelson wondered what his great-great-grandfather, a native of Northwest Florida, might think of the day and talked about the next 100 years.

"An airport becomes a magnet for economic activity," he said, helping to attract high-tech businesses and other industry. "What you have here is a major economic engine."

Montgomery said he began discussions with St. Joe 18 months ago and walked away from the initial talks with a dream of Northwest Florida becoming the company's 69th destination.

"The reality is that what you have accomplished exceeds that dream," he said, talking to both the crowd and the assembled dignitaries. "We want to thank you for your vision."

About 80 Southwest employees disembarked from the first orange and blue Southwest flight from Dallas, ready to pitch in today and help clear brush and build bog bridges in Pine Log State Forest along the Florida National Scenic Trail.

The trail is about 4 miles northwest of the northern boundary of the new airport.

"We are here to volunteer and to show the 'Share the Spirit' of Southwest," said Southwest employee Eric Daniels, a graphic designer in the company's Dallas office. "We are here to help with the opening and work with the community."