

Soaring Praise: Trustees like new aviation center

By Rita Frankenberry

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BARCO — College of The Albemarle officials praised Currituck leaders for the county's \$7.1 million investment in the Regional Aviation & Technical Training Center after the college's trustees got their first glimpse inside the recently completed facility Tuesday night.

"I applaud the commissioners of Currituck," said Pasquotank Commissioner Joe Winslow, a member of the COA Board of Trustees, on Wednesday. "They made a commitment to (fund the facility) and what they have is a remarkable state-of-the-art building. It will be recognized as one of the top programs in aviation in North Carolina shortly, I think."

COA Board of Trustees Chairman Fletcher Willey likewise credited Currituck commissioners for having the foresight to realize the potential of the new facility.

"Those guys saw the opportunity, found the funding and found the location," Willey said. "It is just going to be great for the whole region."

COA President Kandi Deitemeyer also had high praise for Currituck's financial commitment to the aviation center, which is located next to the Currituck County Regional Airport in Barco.

"We cannot champion Currituck enough for their willingness to bring this vision to fruition," she said. "This region has been pulling for this aviation program for some time."

Currituck wasn't COA's first choice of partner in the new Regional Aviation & Technical Training Center. Several years ago, COA had plans to build the facility in Elizabeth City. But plans languished after state funding never came through.

The plans lay dormant until late 2011, when COA approached the Currituck Board of Commissioners and asked if the facility could be built there. Currituck commissioners agreed to foot the bill for the building itself – at \$7.1 million – and a little more than a year after breaking ground on the 36,000-square-foot facility, COA's newest campus building has come to fruition.

The new facility includes four aviation labs and houses four classrooms that are each equipped with high-tech teaching tools and aviation equipment. The facility also has two aircraft to be used in its instructional program, a Cherokee 140 and a Cessna Commuter.

Students at the Training Center will have an opportunity to learn subjects like aviation technology, mechanical engineering, architectural technology and computer-integrated machining.

"We will bring in the opportunity for our people to be fully-trained for high tech aviation systems," Willey said. "We're going to have people who will be ready for high-tech aviation positions. The salaries that people could command are going to be outstanding."

Paul O'Neal, chairman of the Currituck Board of Commissioners and a member of COA's trustee board, said technical training like that offered at the new facility is critical in today's job market.

"When we can teach a student a life skill, they have opportunities all through life," O'Neal said. "A skill that will transfer to many types of jobs, and we think that's important. The economy as it is today, there's a need for employees with technical skills. There's a lot of skilled labor needs in Hampton Roads and locally."

Although the new aviation center officially opens on Aug. 2, Deitemeyer said the school is already offering some summer courses in the facility. One of the school's new programs — aviation — already has 19 students registered for classes in the fall. The program can handle up to 24 students.

Later this month, the Federal Aviation Administration will be taking a tour of the Regional Aviation & Technical and looking at its facility and equipment to certify the program.

"It is a very significant moment for the college and a huge economic driver for the region," Deitemeyer said. "We want to be able to train the folks in this area and put them in good-paying jobs."