

Aviation classes start in April

By Reggie Ponder
©The Daily Advance
Tuesday, March 5, 2013

MAPLE — By the time your federal income tax return is due, College of The Albemarle expects to be teaching aircraft maintenance at its new \$7 million facility in Currituck.

With a certificate of occupancy likely as early as next week, COA Director of Aviation Maintenance Elton Stone is preparing to move the program into the new building.

Stone hopes to be in the new building Monday, since that will be the three-year anniversary of COA's hiring him to get the aircraft maintenance program off the ground. By mid-April, the first aviation maintenance classes in the new building should be under way.

COA plans to launch its Federal Aviation Administration-approved airframe and power plant maintenance certification program in August.

In the meantime, the school already will be teaching various modules in aircraft maintenance at the new facility.

Stone has about 10 students already for the first class in the certificate program. He plans to have the full FAA limit for the class — 24 students — by August.

"My goal is to have a waiting list by the time we start in August," Stone said.

The aviation maintenance program will prepare students for good jobs and also help bring good jobs to the area, Stone said.

"If we build it they will come, and I know they will," Stone said. "Currituck built this building right here and it will draw in industry."

But Currituck won't be the only beneficiary by any means, he said. Elizabeth City's aviation commerce park also should get a boost from the new program, he said.

"The whole area is going to benefit from this," Stone said.

The program also will teach students skills they can use in fields other than aviation, he said.

"We're training students for aviation," Stone said. "But hydraulics is hydraulics, sheet metal is sheet metal. What we're doing is we're opening the door to their skills and talents."

The Golden LEAF Foundation funded the purchase of two airplanes for COA, a 1972 Cessna 150 and a 1972 Piper Cherokee.

While both planes are completely flyable, they will be staying on the ground for use in Gary Ambrose's aviation ground school and in the aviation maintenance program, Stone explained.

The aviation ground school prepares student pilots to pass the written exams required to get a private pilot's license.

Stone said he and Gary Ambrose went to Joplin, Mo., during the first week of December to pick up the Cessna.

The flight back took three days because they weren't familiar with the plane yet and wanted to fly it only during daylight hours, Stone said.

At the Currituck Airport Tuesday afternoon, Stone tapped the propeller of the Cessna as he explained how the aircraft will provide hands-on training in aircraft maintenance.

"We can break this airplane into segments and teach a class on it," Stone said.

The gamut of aircraft maintenance topics includes acrylics, propellers, sheet metal for fuselage maintenance, engine overhaul, electrical and electronics.

Stone said he doesn't think there are many programs in the United States that have this kind of aviation maintenance training facility as well as access to an airport and the kind of support that the COA program has from Currituck County.

"I'm really glad that Currituck stepped up," Stone said.

Currituck provided more than \$6 million for the new facility and COA pitched in about \$800,000, according to Stone.

In Stone's opinion, there's nowhere better for the program to be based.

"This is eastern North Carolina," he said. "This is where it all started — the birthplace of powered flight."