

## COA gears up for aviation program

By Peter Williams

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The College of The Albemarle is moving forward with equipment and a staff to open an aviation program at the Currituck County Regional Airport.

The Currituck County Board of Commissioners earlier this week approved a plan to build the \$6 million building that will house the program. Next month, the state community college board will be asked to approve the curriculum.

COA has already hired a director, Elton Stone, and bought hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of cutting-edge machining equipment it will eventually move to Currituck along with the machining program.

Currituck County Manager Dan Scanlon said the programs will offer long-awaited vocational training for high school graduates, which could open up more jobs for them in the area. The county will likely borrow the money to build the building, and could break ground by early 2012.

The original plan called for a 25,000-square-foot building, but the new plan includes 40,000 square feet of space.

“There are two things driving this (larger building),” Scanlon said. “One is the things we learned when we went to Craven County was the need for additional support space. The second was the addition of other programs like machining and welding.”

If everything stays on track, COA could enroll the first students in the fall of 2013. The first batch, about 24 people, could graduate two years later with FAA certification that would allow them to produce airframes, engines and other parts of an aircraft.

By the time they graduate, there will be an estimated need for 600,000 aviation workers in the U.S., Stone said. They will be able to earn about \$22 an hour based on labor department estimates.

Stone spent 25 years in the U.S. Navy working on F-14 Tomcat fighter jets and has a bachelor’s degree in professional aeronautics. The native of Roanoke Rapids has lived in Camden for the past 13 years.

Students who want the FAA certificate will study for four semesters. After the program matures, it could graduate 50 students a year.

Graduates will be qualified to work on a whole lot of things, Stone said.

“Once they get certified, there are tons of jobs out there, not only in aviation,” Stone said. “Most people don’t think about golf cart mechanics, but our people will be able to work on those. They will be able to go and work with a CAD (Computer Aided Design) program. They’ll be able to work as machinists. There are whole slew of jobs.”

Vance Aydlett, chairman of the Currituck Board of Commissioners, said Monday he hopes the new center will also provide more vocational offerings to high school students. He’s glad the program will provide marketable skills to students who do not want to attend a four-year college.

The COA program would be the fourth aviation program offered through the state community college system. Craven Community College has had a program for about 10 years. Havelock is home to the Fleet Readiness Center Mid Atlantic, which services military jets and helicopters. There is also a program in Wayne County, near Seymour Johnson Air Force Base and in one in Guilford County.

Stone toured the Craven facility twice as well as one in Rome, Ga. One lesson learned from the Craven visit was the need for plenty of storage space, something the new Currituck plan approved Monday provides. About 5,000 square feet of the new 40,000-square-foot building will be devoted to the computer-integrated machining program headed by Stan Nixon. It’s now located in a 1,900-square-foot space at COA built in 1978. They simply have run out of room, Nixon said.

Nixon’s program is not for everybody. Out of the latest group of 26 people who started the program just 10 remain. Those who finish will have no trouble finding jobs that pay \$16.50 to \$17.50 an hour.

Commissioner Paul Martin said he believes a trained workforce will entice more businesses to locate in northeastern North Carolina.

“We hope this (aviation) is a growing industry sector in North Carolina,” said Sharon Morrissey, chief academic officer for the state community college system.

All of the other aviation programs in the state approach the situation in a different way. The Guilford program is heavily involved with electronics and has corporate support from Honda Aircraft Company, which is based at the Piedmont Triad International Airport. The COA program will stress more of the structural issues involving aircraft.

When the state reviews a program, it considers if there is a market for the skills the students will get, the cost of it and where the college will get the resources to do it, Morrissey said.

“Based on what I know of aviation technology programs, these are the most expensive to start from scratch.”

COA President Kandi Deitemeyer said the college also plans to re-launch a mechanical drafting program and base it at the Currituck airport.

“We are moving things along,” Deitemeyer said.

The COA machining program recently acquired new equipment including a five-axis milling machine. The money came from the regular capital budget of the community college.

“We will also be seeking some grants,” Deitemeyer said.

Stone said when it is all said and done, about \$1.2 million more in equipment will be needed for the Currituck facility for just the aviation program.

The move to Currituck will mean adding an aviation instructor, one for machining and one for mechanical drafting plus two or three others.

COA had been working with Elizabeth City State University on a joint program at the Elizabeth City-Pasquotank Regional Airport. But when talks stalled and the Currituck option opened up, COA retooled the plan.

“The time allowed us to think about putting other skill sets in the program,” Deitemeyer said.

“We would not have been able to do some of this under the original plan. With change comes great opportunity and we need to embrace that.”

*(Cindy Beamon contributed to this report)*