

Local



Work continues at an entrance point to the new Skyplex commercial development. RICARDO ROLON/THE NEWS-PRESS

Airport spending hundreds of millions on new projects

In the Know

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Jeff Mulder, executive director of the Lee County Port Authority for the past two years, earned his pilot's license at age 16, not long after receiving his driver's license.

Mulder, 53, always has had a passion for flying.

"No one in my family did it," he said, after addressing the Real Estate Investment Society's monthly lunch last

week. "I was just intrigued by it. I had a job on a farm, and I used that money to pay for flying lessons."

Now, Mulder is piloting the port authority into new territory. The Michigan native and former airport director in Tulsa, Oklahoma, is spearheading four major Lee County airport projects, with a fifth on the horizon, that will cost hundreds of millions of dollars. Two of those projects are on the verge of completion. They are:

- A new, \$14 million road connecting Daniels Parkway to a technological business hub. Skyplex Boulevard, located directly across the street from Jet-Blue Park, spring training home of the

Boston Red Sox, will run about half a mile south and connect with Chamberlain Parkway. About 70 royal palms will line the half-mile boulevard, which will have about 35,000 square yards of asphalt, said Vicki Moreland, director of communications for the port authority. The road is slated to open in mid-to-late July. There will not be a stoplight at either end for now. Skyplex Boulevard will allow for easier access of Gartner and Alta Resources employees to their new corporate headquarters. Neogenomics is also in negotiations to lease office space in

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that corridor, which is called Skyplex.

■ A \$13 million modernization project includes installing new ticket counter kiosks and digital signage throughout the airport's 28 gates. This will be finished by the end of this year.

■ A \$77 million to \$80 million air traffic control tower is expected to break ground this summer and should be finished by 2021.

■ A \$200 million expansion project will centralize security at Southwest Florida International Airport. That will start in 2020 and be scheduled for completion in 2023.

Instead of having 12 security lanes spread over three gate checkpoints, there will be 14 lanes, with future capacity of 18 lanes, located at one, central entry point. This means the airport's largest bookstore and restaurant, Shula's Steakhouse, will be rebuilt and relocated to the other side of the security checkpoint. A new gate B1A passenger hold room and aircraft ramp, a new, 12,000-square-foot remote loading dock, reconfiguration of the Federal Inspection Station and a new, four-story elevator and stairwell will be part of the expansion project as well, Moreland said.

"We did a study with the airlines and with TSA," Mulder said, referring to the Transportation and Security Administration. "We looked at 10 different options.

"It's better for the customer, because they want to get through security first."

None of the money for any of these projects comes from property taxes. All of it comes from fees airlines pay to use the airport.

"Right now, airlines pay about \$6 per passenger," Mulder said. "That's a pretty good number."

Having other streams of income besides air traffic in the form of real estate also helps keep those airline fees lower, Mulder said. This helps attract more flights to the area.

The Page Field Commons shopping center is owned by the port authority. RaceTrac is leasing property for the gas station just north of Page Field as well.



Big Arts is under construction at the same site of its previous building on Sanibel Island. SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

The new Skyplex tech business hub will provide additional revenue streams.

These projects are happening amid unprecedented growth for the airport in terms of passengers. Consider some of the recent milestones:

■ One million passengers passed through Southwest Florida International in January.

■ There were 1.1 million passengers in February, a record for that month.

■ March 23 featured 400 flights.

■ March 30 had 30,000 passengers, a record.

■ March generated 1.5 million passengers, more than all of 1983, when the

airport first opened.

Given the growth, Mulder said he would like to see another project to completion within five to 10 years: A second runway, parallel to the only existing runway.

"If something happens to that runway, like a pavement problem, we have to close the runway," Mulder said.

Page Field's runways outnumber Southwest Florida International's 2-1.

"Page Field was built originally as a training base," Mulder said. "When they built the new airport in '83, one runway was justified."

The Federal Aviation Administration has yet to approve a second runway, Mulder said. He's hoping to oversee this project over the next decade for what has become the fifth-busiest airport in Florida and 46th in the nation.

BIG ARTS, BIG PROJECT: Not often does big development happen on Sanibel Island. But it's happening now.

Big Arts, celebrating 40 years of existence, razed its original building earlier this year, and it is livestreaming construction of the new, \$14 million replacement at bigarts.org.

Set to open at the same site, 900 Dunlop Road, off Periwinkle Way, the grand opening for the public is slated for Jan. 25.

"The project to build a new Big Arts started five or six years ago," said Donna Gillroy, acting marketing and development director for Big Arts. "The landscape in Sanibel is very sensitive to environmental issues, expansion and development. There is very little land available. We spent two years looking at purchasing land, looking at other nonprofits to partner with. We finally decided that the best thing to do was to raze the existing building.

"The original Big Arts building, which was still in use as a gallery and box of-

ice, was from 1979. The rest of the facility, a 410-seat auditorium hall were cobbled together onto that."

The new auditorium will have the same number of seats. But the stage will be larger. The two-story building will have an elevator and state-of-the-art equipment.

"All of the buildings at Big Arts had long ago exhausted their life," Gillroy said.

Amy Nowacki, who has designed many buildings on Sanibel, served as the architect.

Stevens Construction of Lee County is leading the construction efforts for what will be known as Christensen Performance Hall, plus a classroom, administrative office and large lobby.

PINE RIDGE ROAD DEVELOPMENT: A new Aldi already has opened at 10991 Saxum Drive, fronting Sanibel Straits, a luxury apartment complex near Summerlin Boulevard and Pine Ridge Road. Coming soon, just to the north of the Aldi: An ABC Liquor store, Heartland Dental (a national chain with more than 900 locations), City Nails & Spa and Tommy's Express Car Wash.

More retail space is available, with units ranging from 1,400 to 6,000 square feet, said Bob Pekol of LandQwest, who is looking to fill the other spots.

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