

Airport operation laid over

Talks stalled on lease transfer that would lead to 100 jobs

By Richard Craver
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A Florida aviation company is considering opening a landing-gear operation at Smith Reynolds Airport that could bring back up to 100 machinist jobs cut by US Airways Group Inc. in 2005.

But negotiations have stalled between the company, Air Carriers Accessory Service Inc. of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., the Airport Commission of Forsyth County and US Airways on a lease agreement, officials said yesterday.

Air Carriers provides outsourced repair and overhaul services to U.S. airlines and corporate and private jets that include pneumatics, electrical and electronics, landing-gear components and hydraulics. It has a 44,000-square-foot operation near Fort Lauderdale

International Airport. US Airways owns the 67,000-square-foot building at Smith Reynolds and has a skeleton maintenance crew there. But the airport owns the land that the building sits on, and US Airways needs the commission's approval to transfer its lease to Air Carriers.

Air Carriers plans to buy four local machinist shops from US Airways, but the plating center is the anchor to its landing-gear plans, said Gary Partin, a product-development official for the company.

The commission denied the airline's first request for a lease transfer in April. The agreement was discussed again at a May 16 meeting.

"We have approved an assignment of the

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lease from US Airways to ACAS, pending certain conditions are accepted by the two companies," said Bill Whiteheart, the chairman of the airport commission. "The conditions are primarily placed on ACAS. We haven't heard back from them yet."

Although Whiteheart and Frank Newton, the airport's attorney, declined to discuss the conditions, Whiteheart said that they are aimed at "protecting the airport commission and the taxpayers of the county" on financial and safety concerns.

"We want to see employment and activity going on in

that facility again," Whiteheart said.

One condition discussed by the groups is the commission's request for a percentage of the annual gross revenue at the local operations. Partin said that it is "an obstacle to completing lease negotiations."

"We believe this could be a substantial operation for us in Winston-Salem," Partin said. "We are not only not asking for incentives, but we want to bring back as many of the workers we can who worked in those machinist shops for US Airways."

Partin said that the operation could have up to 200 employees within five years including machinists jobs and new positions.

Whiteheart said that the percentage request is mandated by

the federal government. He said that airports must meet federal guidelines for rates and charges with tenants to qualify for future grant money and protect grant money already awarded.

Chuck Allen, a director of corporate affairs for US Airways, said that the airline has received the commission's offer.

"We expect to respond to it fairly soon," Allen said. "The building no longer serves our purposes, but it certainly remains a viable repair facility at a time when you are seeing more repair work being outsourced and more product coming into the marketplace that sooner or later will need repair work."

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