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Gray Insurance wants to bring 115 jobs here

By Brennan David

Gray Insurance of Metairie submitted big plans to the Hammond Northshore Regional Airport Authority Wednesday but will have to wait 30 days for a decision.

The oil and gas insurer wants to build a 86,000-square-foot hangar at the airport. The multi-million dollar structure would fit four to six large jets, as well as 12 small aircraft - all at the same time.

Also, Gray Insurance is planning to relocate its Metairie headquarters to Hammond on 346 acres bought from Southeastern Louisiana University for \$4.2 million at auction in June.

The property, across from the airport on Vineyard Road, was once farmland on which Southeastern Louisiana University operated an agriculture department.

"We plan to be the best neighbor the airport could have," said Matt Hardey, Gray Insurance consultant.

The new hangar will sit on 180,000 square feet of land. It will be the largest hangar at the airport and will include office space for hangar employees as well as apartments for pilots. The new headquarters will employ 115 people and will serve as a testing site for Gray Matter, a robotics division of the company.

Hardey said the insurance company operates a Hawker 1000 twin jet and has already ordered two Eclipse 500 business jets due to be delivered in late 2007.

"We wanted to build a hangar with enough parking space," Hardey said. "Without parking space, we would have to land in Hammond to drop off employees and then fly to Baton Rouge to park the jet. To leave, the jet would fly from Baton Rouge, land in Hammond, pick up the employees and take off again. This gives us an opportunity to have a home."

Because of the hangar's size, a committee was created to find possible solutions involving an existing hangar and a future hangar. The Missionary Institute of St. Bonaventure currently owns and operates a hangar in the space Gray Insurance wishes to place its new hangar. MISB recently renewed a 10-year lease with the site. The Daily Star was unable to reach MISB for comment.

Also in planning is a hangar owned by Randy Felder. Felder said he does not have a problem right now with moving his planned hangar to an alternate site, but he said that could change pending on what is decided.

The committee, which was requested by Mayor Mayson Foster, will meet to try to find alternate locations for the two hangars. Gray Insurance will pay to relocate the MISB's hangar, if the institute agrees to relocate.

If a solution cannot be found, Hardey said the company would have to consider different layout plans for the hangar to fit into a tighter space.

The committee will report its findings to the airport authority at next month's meeting.

Hardey said the airport and the university were major factors in the company's future relocation to Hammond. In recent years, Gray Insurance has developed a branch dedicated to robotics called Gray Matter, which is now directly linked to Hammond.

In past years, Gray Insurance hired several Tulane University engineering students studying under Chris Koutsougeras. After Hurricane Katrina, Tulane elected to not continue its engineering program, which sent Koutsougeras to SLU in Hammond.

Koutsougeras currently serves as the director of the computer science and industrial technology department at SLU, which was a major selling point according to Hardey.

“We think the future of the area is linked with the future of the university,” Hardey said. “

Property on Vineyard Road will also be used to test autonomous car robots. Two months ago, the insurance provider became one of 36 teams to advance to the semi-finals of The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency Urban Challenge.

The Department of Defense conducts the annual contest to see if robotic cars that control themselves can move their way through cities. Team Gray beat out vehicles built by leading computer-science researchers and companies backed by defense contractors to complete the Grand Challenges 150-mile course.

“After the hurricane, Tulane shut down its engineering department,” Hardey said. “Many of the Tulane scientists moved to Southeastern, which was an attraction to the area.”

The Urban Challenge is set for Nov. 3 at the urban military training facility in Victorville, Calif. The team's next challenge will be to complete a 60-mile fuel resupply mission in under six hours.

Vehicles must avoid moving obstacles, merging into oncoming traffic, and obeying California driving laws.