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Airbus to add 80 Wichita jobs

BY MOLLY McMILLIN
The Wichita Eagle

Airbus North America will add 80 new jobs in Wichita over the next three years, the company said Thursday.

Airbus will retain its current facility in Old Town and expand into the former Kansas Sports Hall of Fame building nearby.

The decision to put the additional work in Wichita has been a months-long process, said Airbus spokeswoman Mary Anne Greczyn.

"There's a shortage of engineers in Europe, and we seem to have a pretty rich pool here in the U.S.," Greczyn said.

Airbus North America, which opened in Wichita in 2002, currently employs 210 engineers.

About half of the 80 engineers to be added will be employees; the rest will be contractors. Together, they will have a total annual payroll of \$10 million.

Including the additional engineers, Airbus will have an annual payroll of \$40 million, including benefits and contractor wages.

For the expansion, Airbus intends to lease the former Kansas Sports Hall of Fame, 238 N. Mead, from Old Town developer Dave Burk, who is buying the building from the city for \$1.43 million.

Airbus has not yet signed the lease on the building. That's expected to be finalized in the next month or two, Greczyn said.

"Then it will be full speed ahead with all of the renovations that we need to do," she said.

Improvements to the building will total about \$1 million. Equipment and technology will total another \$1.5 million.

The facility will open later this year, but a date has not been set.

The expansion is good news for the city and downtown, Mayor Carl Brewer said.

"It sends a great message that the city of Wichita is fighting through the aviation challenges that have been put forth," Brewer said. "These are lots of good engineering jobs in a specialty job market that are good for our economy, good for the aviation industry, and it's an excellent way to start the year."

The growth is an important statement for Wichita's continuance as a center for aviation, said Vicki Pratt Gerbino, president of the Greater Wichita Economic Development Coalition.

"What Airbus is saying in making this kind of investment is we're doing world-class engineering and the place we want to do more of that work is Wichita, Kansas," Gerbino said. "It speaks volumes about our stature and credibility in that sector."

Wichita and Sedgwick County are expected to approve incentives for Airbus at meetings this month.

The city and county have each offered Airbus \$200,000 in forgivable loans in incentives. The state also will provide up to an additional \$2.5 million in a variety of incentive programs.

Burk said he still has to close on the sale of the building.

"I think everybody's in agreement," Burk said. "We just have to do the protocol."

Airbus's Wichita facility focuses primarily on wing design. In the past year, Wichita engineers also began providing structural design and analysis for Airbus aircraft operated by U.S. airlines as it relates to the maintenance and repair of the wings.

That work is expanding. Eventually, the Wichita office will operate two shifts to help give airlines round-the-clock service.

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