

CITY OF FAIRHOPE

Submission for the 2015 Norman J. Walton, Sr. Regional Award

For the 2015 Norman J. Walton, Sr. Regional Award from the South Alabama Regional Planning Commission, the City of Fairhope nominates The Academy at the Fairhope Airport. The \$2.7 million aviation training facility, which accepts high school students for a dual-enrollment program, recent high school graduates, and adult students, opened in January 2015 at the H.L. “Sonny” Callahan Airport. We believe this project, originally developed in cooperation with Baldwin County Board of Education, Faulkner State Community College, Enterprise State Community College, and the City of Fairhope and Fairhope Airport Authority, meets all the criteria for the award, noting its cost effectiveness and innovation, demonstration of cooperation among various entities, what it offers the overall quality of life in our region, and the problems it addresses.

1. Problem Solving

The facility addresses a number of issues. It meets the need for additional workforce development in the aviation and industrial maintenance fields and provides increased opportunities for students and adults to land good-paying jobs at home in Baldwin, Mobile, and Escambia counties that don’t necessarily require a four-year college degree.

In 2012, when Airbus announced plans to open a \$600 million aircraft assembly plant in Mobile, local education and economic-development officials recognized the need to develop a workforce trained in skills required by the area’s burgeoning aviation industry. The July 2015 opening of the Airbus jetliner assembly line at the Brookley Aeroplex in Mobile (and the growth of additional aviation-support industries throughout the region) increased the number of job vacancies for a specifically trained workforce—a workforce now being trained at the facility in Fairhope.

In addition to directly serving the workforce needs of Airbus, The Academy at the Fairhope Airport provides training that can supply employees to other business and industry currently operating in south Alabama, including United Technologies, Segers Aero Corporation,

Continental Motors, ST Aerospace, Star Aviation, PHI Helicopter Inc., and Southern Avionics, as well as Austal and other ship building facilities in south Alabama and the auto industry. Classes currently being offered at The Academy include welding, industrial maintenance (the repair and upkeep of the different types of high-tech equipment and machines used in an industrial setting), and avionics.

As Governor Robert Bentley stated in his comments for the opening of The Academy at Fairhope Airport, “If you don’t have a skilled workforce, you can’t recruit and you can’t retain. What we’re doing here today is training our workforce and that is so important to these [international] companies; that’s what they look for.”

2. Intergovernmental Coordination

The Academy at Fairhope Airport was developed with the assistance and support of two community colleges: Faulkner State Community College and Enterprise State Community College, the Baldwin County School Board, and the City of Fairhope and the Fairhope Airport Authority. The partnership resulted in the affordable construction of a quality facility, staffed by trained instructors, with outreach to high school as well as adult students.

Early in 2013, the Baldwin County Board of Education approved an operating lease for the facility that allowed for the construction of the 15,000-square-foot, \$2.7 million facility, funded by the BCBE on airport property provided by the City of Fairhope and the Fairhope Airport Authority, with Faulkner State and Enterprise State community colleges providing the instructors.

3. Innovation

Along with the innovative cooperation among the community colleges, the Baldwin County School Board, and the City of Fairhope and the Fairhope Airport Authority, The Academy offers innovative scheduling and online classes that accommodate the needs of its students.

Mandy Bezeredi, Career Technical Chair and Career Coach, Faulkner State Community College, notes that The Academy not only offers state-of-the-art technology in its classrooms and labs,

but it does so in a way that takes advantage of the latest technology. “The Academy provides relevant training for our area’s fastest growing industries and it offers flexible scheduling to accommodate schedules of high school students as well as working adult students.”

Another innovation that adds to the flexibility is that many of the classes are offered entirely online, said Peter Poirier, industrial maintenance instructor at The Academy. “Students do classroom work online then come to class for discussion and labs. In this way, they are often able to start work while still completing their education. Early in the program, I had two students who got jobs in the apprenticeship program at Austal shortly after beginning their studies here.”

Industrial maintenance is a high-demand field, as it ensures the production and quality of advanced manufacturing machinery and equipment, Poirier said. “A degree gives students a heads up over others in the apprenticeship program. They will have a lot more education and experience and will move up chain faster.”

4. Benefit to Regional Quality of Life

The education and degree received through classes at The Academy will increase job opportunities for local high school students as well as adults leading to an improved economy with more young people staying in area after graduation. In general, increasing the size of the available workforce in the highly skilled areas of aviation and industrial maintenance will help keep existing industry here and attract new industry to south Alabama. As Fairhope Mayor Tim Kant noted at the opening of The Academy, “We have an opportunity to make sure our children will be able to finish high school, and have a job where they can support their families right here. That’s the most positive thing that we can do.”

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, aircraft mechanics and service technicians and those in aerospace product and parts manufacturing can expect to earn an annual mean wage of between \$51,500 and \$61,300; welders in the aerospace manufacturing industry can expect to earn an average mean wage of approximately \$44,500. Filling those types of jobs in our region with individuals trained at The Academy at the Fairhope Airport will greatly add to the overall economic base of all of south Alabama.

5. Cost Effectiveness

The cooperation among the various entities in constructing and running The Academy allowed for this facility to be built and operated in a cost-effective manner by utilizing city-owned property at the airport as well as existing educational programs at the high school and college level.

The dual-enrollment program that allows for students to enroll in classes for college credit while still attending high school is cost-effective for students and parents as it shortens the time needed to attain a college degree and provides students with college credits that are transferable to any college or university. In addition, for high school students, if the classes taken are being used toward their high school graduation credits, the students (and their parents) are exempt from paying application, registration, tuition, laboratory, and special fees. This allows the students to get a head start on their college career and reduce the amount of time they will be in college, thus reducing the amount of money their degree will cost.