



The Herald - Everett, Wash. - www.HeraldNet.com

Published: Wednesday, February 28, 2007

Future of Flight looks east

Everett's aviation center says Asian tourists may boost attendance

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MUKILTEO - The Boeing Co. and Airbus aren't the only ones looking to do business with China.

So is the Future of Flight Aviation Center in Mukilteo.

After wrapping up its first full year in business, the center fell shy of its revenue and attendance goals last year. The Future of Flight and Boeing Tour Center saw about 81,000 visitors fewer and \$468,500 less than projected in 2006. But museum and county officials remain positive about the center's prospects, focusing their eyes eastward.

"The exciting news for this year is we're expecting a high number of international guests," said Sandy Ward, marketing director for the Future of Flight.

The center, near Paine Field, offers an array of aviation exhibits, ranging from an interactive design-your-own-airplane display to a model of one of the engines used in the Boeing Co.'s 787 Dreamliner. For an extra \$6, visitors can tour Boeing's widebody plane manufacturing site.

At the center, maps of the world and United States help Ward and others keep track visually of where visitors live. Clusters of black and red pins cover Europe, Japan and parts of China.

"The emerging market is mainland China," Ward said.

Several upcoming events might trigger additional tourism from China. The Seattle Seahawks will play a preseason game in Beijing this August. Following the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing, the winter games will be held in 2010 in Vancouver, B.C., just two hours north of Everett.

Museum officials already have taken steps to attract tourists from Taiwan and Korea - two countries targeted recently by the governor during a trade mission - by adding languages spoken in those countries to the center's build-your-own-plane exhibit.

Future of Flight needed about 185,000 paying visitors to break even last year, meaning it fell more than about \$300,000 short in revenue from admissions. However, the center raked in more money than expected - approximately \$437,000 total - in rental space revenue, said Dave Waggoner, director of Paine Field. The Future of Flight has more than 30,000 square feet of space available to rent for business meetings and special events. In 2007, the center will need 175,000 visitors to break even, Waggoner said.

"I think from a community perspective, it's working well," he said. "We just need to make a few adjustments to make it work better as a business."

For its part, Boeing intends to shake things up a bit on its tour in 2007.

"It was a year of learning for us," said Debbie Heathers, a Boeing spokeswoman.

"There are a lot of little tweaks we're making," she said.

As a response to visitor feedback, Boeing plans not only to add a new video to its tour but also to upgrade the balconies that offer views of the factory floor, incorporating new signs and displays.

The company used to operate the tour out of a small building near the Everett factory. Initially, Boeing offered a free tour and later charged \$5. A trip to the Future of Flight and a ticket for the tour costs adults \$15.

As the fee has increased, Heathers found that visitor expectations are also higher - thus the need for changes.

Buses shuttle visitors from the tour center to viewing platforms overlooking either Boeing's 747 or 777 and 787 lines. Although there hasn't been a system to allow visitors to pick which production line they'll see, Boeing is working to iron out that wrinkle in the tour, Heathers said.

"We need to really work on making sure visitors get the experience they're looking for," she said.

Later this year, Boeing and the Future of Flight center expect a boost in ticket sales and event rentals as the plane maker rolls out its 787 Dreamliner.

"Who isn't going to want to see the 787 built?" Heathers said.

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