

## Aviation firm to open office outside NextGen Aviation Research and Technology Park

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EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP - Metron Aviation, a contractor working on the NextGen Air Transportation System, will open a local office Monday, becoming the first aviation-related company to locate here since the FAA announced \$7 billion in contracts last year.

Yet the Dulles, Va.-based company does not now have plans to commit to space in the highly anticipated NextGen Aviation Research and Technology Park planned on the campus of the William J. Hughes Technical Center. Instead, Metron's new office will be a suite in a business park on Scarborough Drive off English Creek Avenue - at least for now.

"We understand that the park's timelines are dependent on their own funding. We have a small but growing population of New Jersey folks who need a home right now," said Jim Gaughan, Metron's executive vice president and general manager of advanced research and engineering. "The park offers advantages that maybe some other places don't, and we'll consider that, and price and everything else, when the time is right."

Documents obtained by The Press of Atlantic City through an Open Public Records Act request show the company had various discussions with park developers in 2010 about locating there.

At the time, Metron officials expressed concerns over pricey square-footage rates proposed for the park, pointing to one of the problems that has plagued the \$300 million project. No tenants have committed to the park, whose developers have struggled to gain financing for the first building since the project's announcement six years ago.

Metron, a subsidiary of Airbus, has about 15 employees working remotely in New Jersey on contracts not related to NextGen and hopes to triple the work force within the next year. The office will be a home for those employees and also is opening in anticipation of future work to come through the company's NextGen contract, Gaughan said.

The move will enhance the company's research and engineering capabilities because of the proximity to the Technical Center, the nation's lead research facility on NextGen, a federal program meant to make air travel safer, quicker and more efficient. Park officials long have said it would be an ideal location for aviation companies looking for increased communication and access to the center.

Plans for the park appeared even more promising when the Federal Aviation Administration announced \$7 billion in NextGen contracts between April and October 2010. At the time the contracts were announced, it was thought they would entice NextGen contractors to open offices here.

However, the FAA has maintained that the park never was meant as a home only for FAA contractors. Metron's NextGen contract was announced in June 2010 and is valued at \$1.15 billion.

In August 2010, Metron was told rates could be as high as \$28 to \$30 per square foot, according to documents obtained by The Press. Later, those figures were adjusted to between \$23 and \$25 per square foot after the project obtained a financing commitment for part of the first building from the Casino Reinvestment Development Authority.

Gaughan and Mark Gaffney, Metron's director of advanced support, told park officials they were looking to lease space in the area and had found rates of about \$20 per square foot. The park's proposed rates

were high, they said. The company was considering between 7,000 and 15,000 square feet, according to a December 2010 report by park Executive Director Ron Esposito.

According to that report, Metron was still interested as of that September after learning of the rates.

"Certainly price is important. We have to be responsible to our own customers," Gaughan said Thursday. "We have to be competitive."

Esposito declined to comment on the rate negotiations other than to say the discussions are dated. He said he was not able to provide current rate estimates because a master developer for the project has not been selected.

"Metron is a great company. I think it's wonderful they're expanding in New Jersey. I've been talking to them for some time, and they assure me that they're still very interested in the park," Esposito said, noting that he has had other conversations with the company this year. "When they have a requirement for a larger amount of space and the buildings are ready in the park, they'll be interested."

Metron's \$1.15 billion, 10-year contract was touted as the largest single award to a small business in FAA history. As of November, only \$385 million of the \$7 billion promised in NextGen contracts was awarded, according to the FAA.

Aviation companies have said the slow release of funds is a deterrent to relocating in the park or the region.

Tech center Director Wilson Felder was not available for an interview, but issued a statement saying the center is pleased that the company will have a presence in the community.

"We will be delighted for them to have even a stronger presence and higher visibility in the future," Felder said.

Ed Salmon, the park's board president, said he does not see Metron's choice to locate on Scarborough Drive as an issue.

"When we look at the research park at full build out, you're looking at a park with seven buildings and 400 square feet of office space. There's going to be a lot more office space needed in the future with this effort as firms locate to this region."

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