

# NORTHWEST FLORIDA BEACHES INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT GATEWAY TO THE PANHANDLE



AS THE GATEWAY TO SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BEACHES IN THE WORLD, ONE OF THE USA'S NEWEST AIRPORTS IS FORGING A NEW PATH.

# GATEWAY TO THE PANHANDLE

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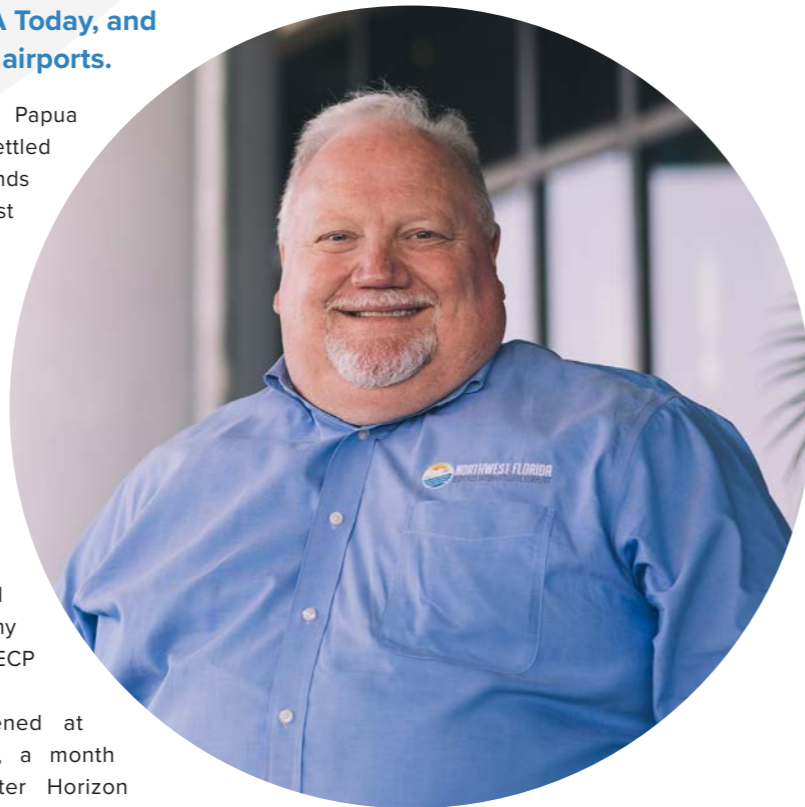
Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport opened in May 2010, one of the first new airports built after 9/11. It was recently named the fourth best Resort Airport by USA Today, and ranked as a runner up among the best small airports.

“We were designed around a lot of those early security requirements, the required distance from terminal to parking, and so on,” Parker McClellan, Airport Executive Director of Northwest Florida Beaches, tells us. “We opened with two airlines, Delta and Southwest. Delta flew into the old airport, Panama City Bay County International Airport with regional jets and smaller aircraft, Southwest joined us in May and was the first commercial airline to land at the airport, and Delta immediately upgauged its aeroplanes to mainline aircraft.”

Tifalmin Airport in Papua New Guinea. They settled on ECP, which stands for “Emerald Coast of the Panhandle” or, as some people suggest, “Everyone Can Party, but we use ECP to whomever we are marketing; to families – “Everyone Come Play”; to businesses “Easy, Convenient and Painless”, but my favorite is “there is ECP in every EsCaPe.”

But early on, the new airport faced a challenge. It needed a three-letter IATA code, and its preferred code, TFB for “The Florida Beaches” had already been taken by

The airport opened at a tumultuous time, a month after the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill, Northwest Florida was facing environmental and public relations challenges caused by the oil on the beaches, but >>



Parker McClellan, Executive Director, Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport.





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### SOUTHERN SKY AVIATION KECP LLC

Southern Sky Aviation KECP LLC (Southern Sky Aviation) is a premier Fixed Base Operator (FBO) located at Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport (KECP) in Panama City, Florida. Strategically positioned along the Gulf Coast, the company serves as a vital gateway for private, corporate, and charter aviation operating in and out of the Florida Panhandle. With a strong emphasis on safety, service excellence, and operational efficiency, Southern Sky Aviation delivers a full-service FBO experience designed to meet the highest standards of the aviation industry.

As an FBO, Southern Sky Aviation provides comprehensive ground support services to aircraft operators and flight crews. Core offerings include Jet A and Avgas fueling, aircraft marshaling and parking, ground handling, ramp services, and coordination of hangar and tie-down space. The company's professional line service team is trained to deliver prompt, precise, and safety-focused support, ensuring quick turnarounds and seamless operations for every arrival and departure. Customers have onsite car rental services through Go Rentals. If a customer would like to leave an automobile long-term at the FBO for future use, we offer long-term covered, secure parking.

In addition to ramp services, Southern Sky Aviation offers pilot and passenger amenities designed to enhance comfort and convenience. These include crew lounges, crew snooze room, dedicated restroom and shower for crew, flight planning areas, concierge coordination, ground transportation arrangements, and access to local accommodations. By maintaining modern facilities and attentive service standards, the FBO creates a welcoming environment that reflects professionalism and reliability.

Safety is the cornerstone of Southern Sky Aviation's FBO operations. The company adheres strictly to federal aviation regulations and industry best practices, with established fueling quality control procedures, continuous staff training, and rigorous ramp safety protocols. Every aspect of ground handling and fueling operations is conducted with careful attention to compliance, risk mitigation, and asset protection.

Operational efficiency is further supported by modern infrastructure, uncongested airspace, and convenient access to regional destinations. Southern Sky Aviation leverages these advantages to provide dependable service for business aviation, general aviation, and transient aircraft traffic. The company works closely with airport management and local aviation partners to maintain high service standards and contribute positively to the airport community.

Customer service remains a defining feature of Southern Sky Aviation. The FBO team prioritizes responsiveness, clear communication, and personalized support, recognizing that each flight operation has unique requirements. From fueling coordination to on-the-ground logistics, the company is committed to delivering a seamless experience for operators, crews, and passengers alike.

Through its focus on professional FBO services, safety leadership, and customer-centered operations, Southern Sky Aviation stands as a trusted aviation partner at Northwest Florida Beaches International Airport, supporting the continued growth of business and general aviation in the region.

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the new airport was able to overcome those challenges and began to grow slowly with significant growth after 2020.

“We had a couple of challenging years at first, but once we got our propellers turning, we saw impressive growth,” McClellan says.

The old Panama City-Bay County Airport PFN served approximately 312,500 passengers a year. Last year, ECP served 1.941.937 million passengers. Financially, McClellan reports the airport is in a much stronger position now than it was 15 years ago.

Our Board of Directors is made up of seven (7) volunteers appointed by the local counties and municipalities and their focus is the success of ECP. The Board, Staff and Community working together has allowed us to continue to meet the changing environment of aviation.

“Opening a new airport is kind of like building a house,” McClellan tells us. “There were unexpected expenses nobody had planned for, but at the end of the day, we stood

up as an airport community to meet the ever-changing demands. We like to refer to Northwest Florida Beaches as ‘Our Airport’, and for the last 15 years, we have built a community.”

**A NEW KIND OF AIRPORT**

Today, four airlines operate at our airport, Delta, Southwest, United, and American Airlines, and we hold a 20-25% market share across the airports of the Panhandle, against Pensacola, Fort Walton, and Tallahassee.

“When we look at the airports across the Panhandle, we all have our own niche, and when another airport picks up a new service, everyone else will have it or something similar within a few years. Our competitive edge is that we are very user-friendly. We are very accommodating to the ever-changing needs of the airlines, other airport partners, and our cost structure is very rewarding for those airlines,” says McClellan. “One performance metric used by airports and airlines is ‘cost per enplaned

passenger’. A couple of years ago, it cost airlines \$2 per passenger who flew through us. Even last year, even with rising costs, it was only \$3. We are cost-conscious and competitive, financially from a business standpoint.”

In addition, we work to enhance the travel experience for our passengers through engagement programs like the Wheels Up – Summer Music Series, ECP Perks that include a surprise cookie delivery for our passengers, and recognizing those who serve. Our Military Welcome Center, operated by a local volunteer group, allows us to provide a place to rest for more than our active duty military, but their families, retirees and others.

Of course, another thing that this airport has to offer is that it can get passengers from baggage to the beach in 15 to 20 minutes.

But one thing that keeps coming up is that ECP is a new airport, surrounded by older and more established airports. It is a fact that McClellan finds himself confronted with in surprising ways on a regular basis.

“We are one of the newest airports in the United States, so everything we do is for the first time,” says McClellan. “When we get a terminal expansion, we have to build a new ramp because we do not have a pre-existing ramp from another terminal to use. When we want to do economic development projects, because we don’t have that existing structure, there are costs that go into that. We are a green field airport, so we have to start from zero.”

It is also a challenge to fund those projects, meaning that McClellan has to carefully weigh priorities when planning the future of the airport.

“There are a lot of moving parts and adjustments that go with how we operate, each and every day, from a business standpoint,” McClellan says.

**EMPLOYEES CONTRIBUTING POSITIVELY (ECP)**

That doesn’t just apply to growing the airport itself, it also applies to how it grows its staff, which has expanded significantly over the last 16 years.

“Our pay is very competitive, our benefit package is one of the best around, and we find that to be a very big incentive for our employees,” McClellan says. “We have a recognition program for employees, so they understand their value to the airport and the community at large. We call it a spot reward. There is a coin labelled ‘ECP’, ‘Employees Contributing Positively’, and what that token does is give you an hour off. If the manager sees you do something they want recognised, they’ll write it up and give you a coin. We have given over 500 hours of time off over the last several years with that program.”

All of this is part of helping the employees understand the role they play in ensuring that the ECP is the best airport in the Panhandle.

“That is down to the whole airport team, what I like to call Team ECP. That includes the TSA, the airline staff, the janitorial staff, the rental cars, all of it,” says McClellan.

**AN AIRPORT BUILT FOR GROWTH & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

The future is looking bright for Team ECP. In January, ECP broke ground on its 80,000 square foot terminal expansion, adding to its existing approximate 125,000 square foot facility. The new terminal will include three new gates, six airline baggage offices, and four additional baggage claim carousels to ECP’s infrastructure. The facility will feature additional concessions, new restrooms, and expanded passenger seating. The project also includes plans to relocate



and expand the TSA checkpoint to provide expedited security screening. We plan to realign several roadways and add new parking options, including relocating Rental Cars to a separate building across the road and moving the security checkpoint. And that is just one part of how the airport is continuing to grow.

“One of the most significant examples of ECP’s role in economic development is the arrival of IAG Aero Group. The company plans to invest \$107 million to build a 120,000-square-foot maintenance, repair, and overhaul facility at the airport, including an extremely rare engine test cell with the option for a second test cell. Plans also call for wide-body aircraft hangars, with the project expected to create hundreds of high-wage aviation jobs for the region.”

That momentum is continuing. Premier Aviation is exploring operations at ECP as well, a move that could bring an additional 250 jobs focused on

regional jets and ATR aircraft and further expand the airport’s aviation market. Beyond these projects, the airport and regional economic development partners are constantly working with site selectors on at least six additional projects, including another maintenance, repair and overhaul company that has already scheduled a second visit.

These efforts continue to underscore the reality that there is far more to an airport than the terminal itself.

As McClellan points out, if you look at a map of Panama City and the Florida Panhandle, there are two ways in or out – drive or fly. That makes ECP more than just an airport. It is a gateway.

“We are the first and last experience many people encounter when they are traveling to and from our unique region, and we are cognisant of that role,” he tells us. “The world’s most beautiful beaches are here in the Panhandle. There’s a field of opportunities to be had here.” ☺





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