



# Flying high in Fort Smith

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OPINION

## Guest writer

The Fort Smith Regional Airport is a diamond in the rough. Those who use it for their business and personal travels already know the laundry list of reasons it works so well: the ability to make it to a major U.S. air traffic hub in under an hour; an attractive, easy-to-use facility; very little congestion or traffic; exceptionally convenient parking; and most importantly, when you're home, you're home.

But I challenge people to look at the Fort Smith Airport in a slightly different light.

When we talk about economic development in the region, we always mention of infrastructure and its importance to how and why a company chooses to expand or locate here. We talk about the highways, railroads, a lively river, health care facilities, education offerings and a host of other items that are all important. But equally as important is our airport and what it offers. It's exactly like an Interstate 49 project or a road-widening plan. And when it comes to how Fort Smith competes in a growing global market with other communities, often the airport can be the most important piece of the plan.

And so news of the Fort Smith Regional Airport lengthening its runway very well may be one of the most significant announcements in recent years for Fort Smith's growing economy and future. The community and the state of Arkansas have joined forces to extend the runway, a project costing about \$22 million. The lengthened runway will be 9,317 feet long and the project is expected to be complete in 2023.

What are the most important reasons this is important? One, a longer runway makes it much easier for airline companies to consider additional routes or adding Fort Smith to its list of cities served. Two, the airport has been underutilized for

years, in large part because commercial and private aviation had other choices from which to fly; a longer runway will change that almost immediately. With an ability for longer takeoffs and landings, commercial and private aircraft can hold more fuel, giving them a farther range, therefore opening up more opportunities for destinations. And three, a longer runway will accommodate a more diverse aerospace and defense aviation community, such as the incoming military long-term pilot training center supporting F-16 and F-35 fighter planes. Ebbing Air National Guard Base, located at the Fort Smith Airport, was recently selected as the location for the Foreign Military Sales Program through which the U.S. sells defense equipment and provides training to other countries.

Looking at the Fort Smith Regional Airport as more than just a place to travel to and from is crucial. Growth at the airport means growth for companies and businesses. It also means Fort Smith will keep moving up a company's list of reasons of why this should be the place for them to expand or relocate. Just like other regions across the country, a growing airport means a community on the move and reaching to expand its potential.

Fort Smith is quickly becoming a model in Arkansas and the region for how a community partners with all of its resources, agencies, and companies to come together and make an area an even better place.



*Tim Allen has served as president and CEO of the Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce since 2013 after previously serving as its chief operating officer.*

