SIGNIFICANT MRO OPPORTUNITIES IN WICHITA REGION, ACCORDING TO EXPERTS

By Emily Younger Barnwell

Following a successful exhibition at the Maintenance, Repair and Overhaul (MRO) Americas in April, one observation emerged – the Wichita region boasts considerable growth potential within the MRO industry.

The Partnership joined more than 1,000 global exhibitors at the event in Chicago and engaged in more than a dozen productive meetings with expanding companies, site consultants and foreign direct investment groups.

“The Wichita region’s strong pipeline of aircraft mechanics combined with a comprehensive aviation ecosystem positions the area for continued industry investment and success,” said Andrew Nave, executive vice president of economic development for the Partnership.

Jet AirWerks, NIAR WERX, Mid Continent Controls, Valence Surface Technologies and Aircraft Covers Unlimited exhibited with the Partnership at the Air Capital of the World booth. Wichita Airport Authority officials came alongside, providing the opportunity for local companies and organizations to connect with more than 16,000 MRO experts and leaders from around the globe.

Representatives from Jet AirWerks, a Wichita-based aircraft component and parts repair company, have been attending MRO Americas for approximately 25 years. The business provides maintenance, repair, overhaul, refurbishment and recertification services for parts and components of several large commercial jet engine models including the Boeing 737 and Airbus A320.

“It’s a great place to visit with customers and to find new ones. It’s also great to see new products that are typically showcased that could help us grow our business,” said Jet AirWerks President and CEO Keith Humphrey.

Growing Wichita’s MRO Business

Humphrey, who oversees more than 50 employees at Jet AirWerks, has 48 years of industry experience. He started his career as a jet mechanic in the Navy and worked at a GE engine overhaul shop before moving from Florida to Kansas to open his jet engine parts repair business in 2006.

“The reasons for starting the business in Kansas were the skilled aviation labor base, the dedicated workforce, local college training and education programs, and the low cost of building space – all perfect conditions for a startup with limited capital. The mission of Jet AirWerks has always been to provide a good-paying, stable job to the people of South Central Kansas,” Humphrey explained.

Kansas delivers 35% of all general aviation planes built in the United States. With a network of more than 450 world-class suppliers, the nation's No. 1 skilled aviation workforce, and a prime global location, Humphrey recognizes the MRO opportunities within the region.

"The first thing I tell people is, 'If you're manufacturing airplane parts there's no reason that you can't repair or refurbish the same or similar parts. Why just make it once when there's an opportunity to repair it several times,'" he explained.

Industry diversification is a key economic priority of the Partnership. Humphrey shares that vision, explaining that growing the region’s MRO sector could create additional employment opportunities and drive economic development.

He gave the example of a business that manufactures the wheels and brakes for a Cessna 172.

"Because the airplane may only fly occasionally, the wheels and brakes hardly ever wear out, but the wheels and brakes on a Boeing 737 typically get used six to eight times a day, every day, under much higher stress levels. That creates a huge business to refurbish those parts. Even though you may not make those parts, you have the technical skill to provide MRO services on the 737 wheels and brakes," Humphrey explained.

He encourages local manufacturers to attend MRO Americas to witness these opportunities firsthand. He adds it will take continued strategic planning, calculated risk and sustained investment to expand MRO capabilities in Wichita, but the framework is already in place.

"I've always thought that if people knew what I knew about Wichita, they would flock to the area to start a new business or move their existing business to the region. I was able to mitigate a lot of the risk by locating here. I got access to a skilled workforce and much lower startup costs than in Florida," Humphrey emphasized. "Additionally, we have a lot of other tangible benefits like a more affordable cost of living, good schools, a balanced pace of life and much less traffic."