CELEBRATING 40 YEARS OF INNOVATION: NIAR EXPANDS GLOBAL IMPACT WITH NEW ADVANCED MANUFACTURING HUB

By Emily Barnwell

The Partnership was honored to join nearly 600 federal, state, academic and industry leaders on Dec. 15 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of Wichita State University's National Institute for Aviation Research (NIAR) and the ribbon-cutting of the new Hub for Advanced Manufacturing Research (HAMR).

The milestone event drew national attention with the attendance of U.S. Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy, who visited Wichita at the invitation of U.S. Senator Jerry Moran. This underscored NIAR's importance to the future of aviation, defense modernization and advanced manufacturing in the United States.

The program featured remarks from:

- **Dr. John Tomblin**, WSU Executive Vice President for Research and Industry and Defense Programs and NIAR Executive Director
- **Dr. Rick Muma**, President of Wichita State University
- **Jeff Fluhr**, President of the Greater Wichita Partnership
- **U.S. Senator Jerry Moran**
- **U.S. Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy**

Dr. John Tomblin, WSU Executive Vice President for Research and Industry and Defense Programs and NIAR Executive Director

A Legacy of Innovation

Dr. John Tomblin opened the program by reflecting on NIAR's 40-year legacy of growth and its impact on global aviation and defense.

"What started as a small research center now has 2 million square feet of laboratory and office space and is one of the most recognizable organizations around the world," said Dr. Tomblin.

He highlighted NIAR's role in advancing aviation safety through its work with the FAA and NASA, and its rapid expansion into

emerging technologies, including hypersonic and digital manufacturing.

Wichita State University (WSU) President Dr. Rick Muma followed with remarks on NIAR's early history and the institute's transformative role in applied learning and student success.

"Over 70% of our students stay in Kansas to work. This is what NIAR and WSU do. What you are seeing here doesn't happen anywhere else in the country," said Dr. Muma.

Fueling Regional Competitiveness

Partnership President Jeff Fluhr emphasized NIAR's role in accelerating economic development, strengthening the workforce and elevating Wichita's global presence.

Fluhr explained NIAR's expertise routinely captures the attention of national and international companies exploring Wichita for future investment. Over the past several years, NIAR has played a pivotal role in site visits that helped attract companies such as Shield AI, Novacoast, Bloc Digital and Bell Flight, among others.

"Because of NIAR, Dr. Muma, Dr. Tomblin, and Senator Moran, national and global industry leaders know Wichita. They come here for site visits. They stay engaged and they choose to invest," Fluhr said.

U.S. Senator Jerry Moran speaking at the 40th anniversary celebration event for Wichita State University's National Institute for Aviation Research (NIAR).

Special Thanks to U.S. Senator Jerry Moran

Fluhr recognized Senator Jerry Moran for his continued commitment to advancing Wichita's global competitiveness.

Over the past several years, Senator Moran has brought cabinet members and CEOs from leading space and aviation companies to the Wichita region.

These visits have helped diversify the area's aerospace supply chain and generated new business for local suppliers. These efforts have strengthened the economy, supported small manufacturers and created jobs.

"When a visitor comes to NIAR, the conclusion is, 'Senator, I had no idea this was taking place anywhere in our nation and in Kansas!'" shared Senator Moran.

Moran pointed to three key strengths that consistently resonate with visitors: a highly motivated workforce, a comprehensive education system from K–12 through higher education and technical training, and world-class research capabilities anchored by NIAR.

"Sometimes people see Kansas as a place they fly over," Moran said. "But when they come here, they see the resources we have to help solve real-world problems, and they see the American Dream in action."

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy celebrated NIAR during the 40th anniversary celebration event.

A National Perspective on Innovation

U.S. Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy celebrated NIAR's leadership in aviation safety, research and next generation manufacturing technologies, noting the institute's national importance.

"This is one of the most exciting times in aviation and manufacturing," Duffy said. "The innovation happening here in Wichita, from new materials to advanced manufacturing, is shaping how America flies, how we stay safe and how we lead the world."

HAMR: The Next Chapter in Wichita's Manufacturing Leadership

The ceremony culminated in the ribbon-cutting for HAMR, a transformative expansion of NIAR's capabilities.

With its scale and advanced technology, HAMR will accelerate solutions for complex manufacturing challenges and shape the future of aviation, defense and emerging industries.

The celebration demonstrated the power of partnership across public, private, academic and federal sectors, reinforcing why Wichita continues to attract global investment and attention.

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