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By David Josar

The Detroit News

MACKINAC ISLAND - One year after Wayne County Executive Robert Ficano announced a task force to create an "aerotropolis" around Detroit Metropolitan Airport, he said the project is starting to take shape.

Standing on the porch of the Grand Hotel during the Mackinac Policy Conference, Ficano said an organic produce warehouse is being constructed in the area and work crews are now preparing the land, sewerage lines and roads in anticipation of other new businesses.

"This is a marathon, not a sprint," he said. "We are moving forward and you can see the results."

Ficano on Thursday also released the findings of a nine-month report that projected more than 60,000 jobs would be created as the 10,000 acres of land around Detroit Metro and Willow Run airports are developed. The process would take roughly 25 years to complete, he said.

Ficano was joined by Doug Rothwell, the president of Detroit Renaissance that has provided financial funding, Dick Blouse, president of the Detroit Regional Chamber, Wayne County Commissioner Joseph Palamara and John Rakolta, CEO of the construction firm Walbridge Aldinger Co. and head of the task force.

"Business needs this," Rakolta said.

Rothwell cautioned that the project will need decades to fully develop but added that the wait will be worth it.

"It's going to take time, but this is the way to initiate the transformation of southeast Michigan," he said.

He declined to say how much money his group has spent on the initiative.

The aerotropolis will cluster around the two airports businesses that move people and freight. Selling points for this project, Ficano said, are the region's strong infrastructure to move freight and the airport's flights to Asia, a major source of goods making their way to the United States.

Ficano said in the next few weeks he and others will lobby Lansing lawmakers to declare the area a "renaissance zone," which would eliminate most state taxes from businesses that move to the aerotropolis.

He also wants to create an "Aerotropolis Development Corporation" to oversee the project and is ready to set-up a one-stop permitting office that would give business wanting to move into the project area all their the necessary permits within 60 days.

Because portions of the aerotropolis are in seven communities, each with different permitting requirements and building and zoning laws, Ficano said he wants them to be made uniform in the area he is targeting for development.

Earlier in the day, the Detroit Regional Chamber unveiled a new web-site, www.translinkedetroit.com, which showcases to potential businesses the region's transportation assets, such as the Ambassador Bridge to and from Canada and the rail system.

"We are ideally suited to be a global logistic hub because of our location," Blouse said. "If we do this right, this could mean a lot of jobs and investment in the Detroit Region."

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