

Destination: Sulphur Springs

SLR soon to offer three ways to land: Concrete, grass or water

By JANICE WOOD

Way back on May 19, 1938, the first landing was made at what was to become Sulphur Springs Municipal Airport (SLR) in Texas by an air mail pilot. Fast forward to modern days and the airport has begun preparations for its 75th anniversary in 2013.

By then, airport officials hope SLR will be a destination airport for not only corporate planes, but also private pilots looking to land on its 2,300-foot grass strip, or seaplane pilots taking advantage of a planned seaplane base on adjacent Lake Sulphur Springs.

Getting to this point is a work in progress, one that began in earnest in 1999 when the city formed an airport advisory board, tasked with maximizing the utility of the airport, according to Joey Baker, airport manager. It worked: In just a short time, improvements included a new terminal building, additional ramp space, the addition of an AWOS (Automated Weather Observing System) system, new hangars, and upgrades to the runways. Those improvements led the Texas Department of Transportation to name SLR "Airport of the Year" in 2003.

Those improvements also paved the

way to "where we are now," Baker said, noting the airport just finished the second phase of a current improvement project, which included everything from dealing with drainage issues to taxiway reconstruction to a main runway reconstruction. During the improvement project, the asphalt runways, as well as the taxiways, went from asphalt to 6 inches of concrete. Other improvements include the addition of new pilot-controlled runway lights and installation of a Precision Approach Path Indicator (PAPI). By August, airport officials hope to have two new GPS WAAS approaches approved. With all the improvements, the 5,000-foot runway, formerly 18/36, is now identified as 01/19 due to FAA requirements and repositioning of magnetic north (See Capital Comments on Page 9 for more on the shift in magnetic north).

While all this is going on, the airport is also incorporating a 2,300-foot grass strip, originally developed by EAA Chapter 1094, as part of its Airport Layout Plan. The FAA has given the grass runway its blessing, according to Baker. "We're on the cusp of that becoming official," he said.

Next up: Creation of a seaplane base on the adjacent 1,400-acre Lake Sulphur Springs, already used by floatplane pilots,



Photo courtesy Sulphur Springs Municipal Airport

Visitors to Sulphur Springs Municipal Airport in Texas, home to American Legend Aircraft Co., will soon have another option for landing: A new seaplane base is in the works.

as well as American Legend Aircraft Co., manufacturer of the Legend Cub. The Light Sport Aircraft manufacturer uses the lake to test the floatplane model of its Cub, as well as for training.

Developing a seaplane base to go with the other assets at the airport "almost puts us in the resort status," Baker said. "I'd love for us to become a destination for pilots interested in training, continuing their training, or just spending some time enjoying the characteristics of the area."

He's talked with members of the Texas Seaplane Pilots Association to find out

what their members need to make the base viable for both pilots and the airport.

Location is certainly a factor. Situated between Dallas and Texarkana, Sulphur Springs is in the heart of the East Texas Lake Country. The area has long promoted itself as a premiere fishing destination, according to Baker, who notes that nearby Lake Fork is famous for the size of its large-mouth bass and quality crappie fishing. The number of lakes available

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to seaplane pilots who could use SLR as a base is astounding. Baker ticks off just a few: Cooper Lake, Lake Bob Sandlin, Lake Ray Hubbard, Lake Tawakoni, Cedar Creek Reservoir, Lake Cypress, Lake Palestine, Lake Tyler, and more.

With SLR as a base, providing fuel and

basic aircraft services, pilots would have infinite choices of where to fly. “We could make a seaplane venture in East Texas,” he muses, adding one day he’d like to be able to challenge Tavares, Fla., for the title as America’s Seaplane City.

In the meantime, SLR will continue to cater to its current customer base, offering flight training, fuel, FBO and maintenance

services, and serving as home to the flight departments of several local corporations. “There are also a lot of planes in and out from companies that have corporate headquarters someplace else, but have locations in or near Sulphur Springs,” he said. “If you look at the local businesses that are growing, many operate a flight department. It’s easy to draw the connections.”

Perhaps the biggest thing SLR has going for it is that the local community — from city management to elected officials to citizens — have made the connection that the airport is a “significant economic engine,” Baker said.

In fact, the city has seen that a \$2 million to \$3 million public investment in the airport’s infrastructure has spawned \$12 million in private investment, ranging from new aircraft to private hangar construction, he said.

“We have a lot of good support from the community,” he said. “We’re fortunate the community has the vision to realize the economic impact that the airport provides.”

The airport is also fortunate to have the

support of the Texas Department of Aviation, he added, noting the department was “critical in making the recent improvements happen.”

903-885-4911 or SLR.aero

