

# Companies see Rockford airport structure for themselves

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## Photos

### Photos



*SCOTT MORGAN | RRSTAR.COM*

Workers build a cargo facility Wednesday, Aug. 27, 2008, at the Chicago-Rockford International Airport in Rockford.

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ROCKFORD —

Nippon Cargo Airlines officials flew in by helicopter to see it.

Representatives from Asiana Cargo drove up from Chicago. At least two other cargo airlines also stopped by.

They came for the “groundbreaking” of Chicago Rockford International Airport’s new cargo facility today — but arrived to find that most of the building’s shell was already up.

Construction started 20 days ago on the 70,000-square-foot structure, and the walls started going up a week ago. Crews are moving fast to finish it by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, the developer and airport officials are wooing airlines that are either at Chicago O’Hare International Airport or looking to gain a foothold in the Midwest. They’re touting the “Chicago Rockford International Cargo Center” as a cheaper, more convenient alternative to O’Hare, and airlines are listening with interest.

“The cost savings are enormous,” said Tim Robinson, sales manager for Asiana Cargo’s Chicago office. Asiana is a South Korean airline that flies Boeing 747s from O’Hare and other U.S. airports.

The challenge, he said, is convincing airlines to take the chance on moving some operations to a new airport.

“A lot of the international carriers, they feel they have to be at O’Hare,” Robinson said. “Our customer base is back in Chicago, so getting the cargo from here to there would be somewhat of a challenge.”

One statistic airport officials tout is that it could take a cargo airline almost as much time to fly into O'Hare, taxi, unload and get out of the airport as it would take to fly to Rockford, unload and drive cargo to the O'Hare area. They say big cargo planes can land at Rockford and park in five minutes, something UPS does more than 30 times a night.

Cargo airline consultant Ken Ryan said Rockford's geographic position is comparable to Tokyo's Narita International Airport. It can take as much as two hours to get from the airport to the city because of traffic, Ryan said, but many cargo airlines fly there.

Eventually, he said, someone will do the math and be the first to move to Rockford. Then others will follow.

"Every airline in the world is looking at ways to save money," he said.

Representatives of at least 40 companies and government agencies were at today's event.

"Seeing is believing," airport Executive Director Bob O'Brien said Wednesday. "They really can't make a corporate decision based on 'The Rockford airport is talking about this.'"

Other airlines that have expressed serious interest are Polar Air and Cathay Pacific, O'Brien said.

The project is being built by Chicagoland firms Tandem Development and Leopardo Construction, both with ties to existing cargo carriers at O'Hare.

Tandem is paying for the building, about half the cost of the \$15 million to \$20 million first phase. The airport is paying for the ramp area and other infrastructure to handle the planes.

After the first phase is built, other buildings would follow as there's demand. Ultimately, the project could include 380,000 square feet and bring an estimated \$100 million to the area's economy, airline officials say.

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