

# THE MONITOR

## Mid Valley Airport goes international

[Elizabeth Findell](#)

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WESLACO—City leaders holding that morning's Mexican newspapers were beaming Friday as they stepped out of a Hawker jet onto U.S. soil at the Mid Valley Airport.

The day marked the first time international flights were able to land at the site, which recently became the first "landing rights" customs processing center that U.S. Customs and Border Protection has opened on the U.S.-Mexico border in 40 years.

The designation allows international planes to land there if they so request. The airport will not be fully staffed with customs inspectors, but inspectors from the Progreso and Donna-Rio Bravo international bridges will be on call to drive up to check incoming planes.

Plans for the landing rights have been in the works for a decade. Weslaco's Economic Development Corporation built an \$800,000 customs building at the airport to donate to the city for a \$1 per-year fee.

Airport administrators have no idea how much the service will be used.

"This is new for us," George Garrett, the airport's aviation director, said. "It's a milestone for Texas because this is the first on-call landing rights area along the border."

The on-call status, Garrett said, does not require the same advanced flight plans that other airports do—fliers can simply call ahead and have customs officers meet them when they land.

"We anticipate seeing a lot of traffic because it's faster," he said.

Because the customs agents who will be working at the airport merely will be on-call from local bridges, no user fees will be required to utilize their services, unlike the region's other international airports.

Weslaco officials said they hoped the ability to fly into the city from Mexico would attract more businessmen to the Mid-Valley.

"It's amazing what this is going to do for the area," said Alicia Aguilar, director of business retention and marketing Economic Development Corporation.

George Lawley, customer service supervisor with McAllen's McCreery Aviation, said he thought the landing rights would be beneficial to Weslaco, but didn't expect it to hurt McAllen's clientele.

"I don't see it affecting us very much because we've got the mall right next to us," he said. "All the larger businesses are in McAllen, so flying to Weslaco, if they're going to be driving to McAllen or Pharr anyway, doesn't make much sense."

Garrett said he expects the customs service to be used primarily by corporate customers who fly to Mexico.

The airport has 106 planes based there, and previously has had about 70 planes per year come in from

elsewhere in the country. Garrett said they can accommodate aircraft ranging from single-engine planes to medium-sized corporate jets.

A planned 2012 runway expansion would make the airport accessible to larger jets.

The Hawker, a Weslaco-based plane belonging to WoodCrafters Home Products, flew Thursday to Veracruz with Mayor Miguel Wise, City Manager Leonardo Olivares and Economic Development Corporation Director Hernan Gonzalez. Mitch Jones, WoodCrafters' vice president of procurement, accompanied the city officials with his wife, Rosa Elena Jones, and 3-month-old daughter Audrey Camille Jones.

The group spent the day touring Veracruz with executives of coffee-shop company Gran Café de la Parroquia, which recently opened its first U.S. coffee distribution center in Weslaco. The Gran Café executives also flew to Weslaco Friday morning in a company Learjet to celebrate the new customs facility.

"An airport without customs these days is not an airport," said Angel Fernandez Cervantes Ceballos, director of commercial business for Gran Café, who was the first to clear customs in Weslaco.

Ceballos said his company would probably use the airport on a weekly or monthly basis.

"It's helping a lot because we have an airport," he said of the facility. "We can be with our business."

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