

Boeing seeks to expand its San Antonio work

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PHOTOS BY JENNIFER WHITNEY/ jwhitney@express-news.net

Workers perform maintenance, modifications and inspections on C-17 cargo planes at Boeing San Antonio.

By **L.A. Lorek** - Express-News

On the South Side of San Antonio, a row of mammoth KC-135 refueling tankers line up outside of Boeing Global Services & Support's repair facility awaiting a full-body makeover.

Inside Building 375, one of the world's largest freestanding hangars, the airplanes get stripped down to their shells and teams of employees rebuild them in eight stages.

"At any time, we have about 50 airplanes on the ground here in San Antonio," said Kevin Devine, Boeing's site leader.

Boeing's operation at Port San Antonio, the former Kelly AFB, plays an integral role in San Antonio's \$3.8 billion aerospace industry, which employs more than 9,500 workers, according to a 2007 city study.

Now, it's hoping to get bigger.

Boeing is bidding again for KC-10 contract work with the U.S. Air Force, which plans to award a new contract by the end of September, Devine said.

Next year, the site expects to get part of the Boeing 787 Dreamliner airplane work that could add hundreds of additional employees to its work force of 1,700, Devine said.

"We do expect to see airplanes in 2010," he said. "We're always looking to expand the business on the platforms we currently work on."

Workers at the site will install and change electrical equipment on the 787 and also do wiring and power panels, mechanical equipment and work on other components.

Although the 787 Dreamliner commercial aircraft must still undergo test flights, Boeing already is preparing for additional work locally, Devine said. San Antonio is among four sites being considered for a second assembly line for the 787, according to Leeham Companies, LLC, an aerospace analyst.

"In the short term it means hiring quite a few more people over a two-year period," Devine said.

Military work has made up the bulk of what the Boeing site does, but it's looking to branch out into the commercial repair and modification industry, said Deborah VanNierop, Boeing spokeswoman.

Boeing recently started up a manufacturing line at its center to make spare aircraft parts. In one corner of a warehouse area, 15 employees build ailerons for the wings of the KC-135s. Boeing plans to expand the program, Devine said.

It's also expanding its international business, Devine said. Boeing San Antonio has worked on planes for the governments of the United Kingdom, Australia and Canada, he said. It's also talking with private mail carriers like FedEx and United Parcel Service, which use planes similar to the KC-10, he said.

Currently, Boeing runs an efficient production line that ensures the KC-135 planes, some of them 40 years old or older, continue to fly to help U.S. soldiers in the fight against terrorism, Devine said. Once overhauled and repainted, the planes get sent back to the U.S. Air Force, which often deploys them to bases fighting the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The site expects to work on 163 airplanes this year, up from 152 last year, Devine said.

The aerospace industry is one of the key components of the manufacturing sector in San Antonio, said Mario Hernandez, president of San Antonio Economic Development Foundation.

"We're constantly looking at developing that industry," Hernandez said. He declined to talk specifically about Boeing.