

The Southern Editorial.....

Metro: All we need is an imagination

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Flying in an airplane is my idea of torture, but during my limited sky excursions it was comforting to know the winged metallic tube was being watched on radar as it roared ahead at a height of five miles.

It's not a time for being under the radar, nor is it when you're trying to pump new life into an airfield that could be a major economic engine if it just received a little love from the state or federal governments. Or both.

I am referring to Southern Illinois Airport, the airfield adjacent to Murphysboro and Carbondale. It's the site of the SIU Transportation Education Center (TEC), the barely broken-in \$63 million home to the university's nationally known aviation and automotive technology programs.

Four years ago, while TEC still was a drawing board concept, it occurred to me the airport had the potential to be a gold mine of economic development. The \$11.4 million Carbondale Armed Forces Reserve Center already was under construction at the airport as a new base of operations for two Illinois Army National Guard units and one Army Reserve unit. There also were plans for a \$4 million public safety building. All of those projects are part of today's airport, which was the state's fourth busiest in 2013.

The airport also provides a home for emergency equipment from the American Red Cross and Southern Illinois Healthcare and is the home base for numerous private planes. Anyone with a little imagination could envision the airport as the home base for all of the state and federal emergency services operating throughout Southern Illinois.

With a little more imagination, an expanded airport property could provide a home for aviation and automotive technology businesses. Entrepreneurs and established businesses alike might see the competitive potential of locating in an area with a favorable cost-of-living and the steady production of ready-to-work degreed professionals seeking aviation and automotive careers. There also would be the collaborative advantages of working in tandem with researchers from SIU. And the university likely would expand both the aviation and automotive technology programs -- which always have more applicants than openings.

I've written of these opportunities many times over the last four years, both in this space and especially in our "Voice of The Southern" editorials. Yet the gold rush has yet to begin.

We're not looking for a handout. What's needed now is belief in the investment potential of an outstanding development plan from Gruen Gruen + Associates of Chicago. Anyone reading the plan would come away impressed and committed to improving highway access to U.S. 51 and Illinois 13, making state-of-the-art broadband and electrical improvements, acquiring land, and building a hangar offering 20,000 to 30,000 square feet of interior space.

This isn't a build it and they will come scheme. Emergency services require top-shelf infrastructure. And I learned last fall there have been inquiries from the aviation industry about building aircraft at the airport, but the needed hangar space doesn't exist. It won't be inexpensive or easy to get the work done, but I'm convinced the investment of up to \$20 million -- maybe by the state, maybe by the feds -- will be returned many times over through resulting development and subsequent tax revenues.

I say it's time to reach for the sky.

Gary Metro is the editor of the Southern Illinoisan.