

The Annual Airport Business Diversity Conference

A Humble Beginning, Now 34 Years Strong

The U.S. Department of Transportation's 1980 airport Minority Business Enterprise (MBE) program regulation (49 CFR Part 23) provided the foundation. But nine forward-thinking individuals saw a need and an opportunity to evaluate how the regulation was being implemented by airport operators. After all, President Reagan had recently signed into law the first statutory Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) provision, and it applied mainly to small minority owned and controlled firms in the Department's transit and highway programs. Given the combination of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) enforcement and industry wide interest to comply with 49 CFR Part 23, these nine individuals concluded that there were enormous possibilities for minority *and* women participation in airport business opportunities.

That was the consensus of this small group gathered in the Administrator's conference room at FAA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. on a fall day in 1983. And they generally agreed that a seminar should serve as the starting point to begin a national dialogue on how to achieve enhanced opportunities and success for women and minority businesses. These nine individuals were: Melvin McCray, Director of Maintenance, Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport; Charles Rogers, Deputy Director of Aviation, Philadelphia International Airport; James Rogers, Airport Manager, Little Rock Airport; C. W. "Bill" Jennings, Assistant Executive Director, Airport Operations, Orlando International Airport; Esterlene Lewis, Chief, Administrative Services, Miami International Airport; a representative of the Lawton, Oklahoma Airport Commission; Audrey Simmons, Program Specialist, FAA Headquarters Office of Civil Rights; and Clark Sharpe, Civil Rights Officer, FAA Southern Region.

Then Director of FAA Civil Rights (subsequently FAA Assistant Administrator for Civil Rights), Leon Watkins, fully supported these efforts, laying the foundation for the first FAA Minority Business Seminar that was held in Miami, Florida on May 3 and 4, 1984. Richard Judy, then Director of Aviation at Miami International Airport, approved a request by his staff to host the Seminar. A six-person planning committee -- Esterlene Lewis; C. W. "Bill" Jennings; Melvin McCray; Leon Watkins; Clement Monge; and Clark Sharpe -- organized and executed the Seminar within a four-month period to focus mainly on creating an understanding of Part 23 and the range of opportunities that it could present. The 74 Seminar attendees, representing some of the largest airports in the country, were enthusiastic about the Part 23 regulation and prospects for enhancing business opportunities for minorities and women.

That is where it all started. But it didn't stop there.

The FAA Central Region hosted the second Minority Business Seminar on June 6 and 7, 1985 in Kansas City, Missouri, supported by Lambert-St. Louis International Airport and Kansas City International Airport, to focus principally on the various service industries operating on Airports (e.g. construction, professional services, and concessions). The Seminar was again organized and executed within a four-month time frame, and attendance increased to 125 persons that year.

Orlando International Airport hosted the third annual conference May 31-June 2, 1987, and on this occasion the conference title was changed from the Minority Business Seminar to the Minority Business Enterprise Compliance Conference. At this point, awareness of the Conference was gaining momentum and general enthusiasm drew 175 persons to the Conference that year to focus primarily on the pending airport grant legislation under which Congress later approved a 10 percent DBE participation goal on all federally-assisted airport contracts administered by FAA.

The FAA continued the Minority Business Enterprise Compliance Conference in 1988, co-hosted by Los Angeles International Airport on May 15th through May 17th in Torrance, California. Concurrent with this Conference, a handful of individuals who were deeply concerned about the economic disparities and barriers preventing minorities and women from fair competition for airport business and jobs founded the Airport Minority Advisory Council (AMAC). Once again Leon Watkins stepped up to the plate and authorized the FAA to jointly host the 1989 Minority Business Enterprise Compliance Conference with AMAC.

Dallas-Fort Worth International supported the 1989 FAA/AMAC Conference, followed by San Francisco International Airport in 1990. The City/County of Denver supported the 1991 Conference, which that year became the third largest aviation conference in the United States and drew over 700 persons. Atlanta International Airport enthusiastically supported the Conference in 1992, followed by Seattle-Tacoma International Airport in 1993, and Cleveland Hopkins International Airport in 1994. The 1995 Conference that was supported by the San Diego International Airport in 1995 drew 840 attendees, and a year later 996 persons attended when New Orleans International Airport supported the Conference. Record attendance was achieved when more than 1,200 persons participated in the Conference supported by Las Vegas-McCarran International Airport in 1997.

After the AMAC Board of Directors formally established the Airport Minority Advisory Council Educational & Scholarship Program, Inc. (AMACESP) in October 1997, AMACESP and FAA continued the tradition of joint sponsorship of the Annual Airport Business Diversity Conference. The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority supported the 1998 Conference, followed by the Houston, Orlando, Detroit, Atlanta, Memphis, Philadelphia, Los Angeles, Jacksonville, Las Vegas, and Indianapolis International Airports in 1999 through 2008, respectively.

The Annual Airport Business Diversity Conference continues to bring together businesses, aviation professionals, government officials and individuals from around the country to discuss a variety of subjects ranging from how to do business at airports to public policy issues impacting the entire aviation industry. And with the added bonus of nationally-known celebrities and commentators, to renowned authors, to Secretaries of Transportation, and just plain folks telling their stories of challenge and success at airports, this event continues to enjoy its status as the third largest aviation conference in the coterminous United States.

Yes, it has been an incredible journey. From a humble beginning in Miami in 1984 to a heritage of success and growth, the Annual Airport Business Diversity Conference is the forum for continuing the legacy of

nine forward-thinking individuals who saw the future and the hundreds of others along the way who have made this Conference 25 years strong in 2009.