

Air Force Breathes New Life In Former GM Plant

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OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — Tinker Air Force Base officials gave political and business leaders and the media a look Monday at the new addition to the Tinker Aerospace Complex inside the shuttered General Motors Assembly Plant.

Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., and state Treasurer Scott Meacham were on hand for a ribbon-cutting ceremony and open house at the addition, where workers will repair and maintain engines from Air Force and Navy aircraft such as the TF33 and the F-117.

The 76th Maintenance Wing operations and other defense missions will be housed at the facility. Several operations already have moved into the building, and the 76th Commodities Maintenance Group began transferring its sheet metal shop into the building last week.

"I remember early on when we were all putting this together and when they heard about it in Washington, they said we didn't have the capacity to fill this up," Inhofe said.

About 100 employees work in the building now and about 800 will be housed there by the end of the year, officials said. Officials also said that because of an increased workload, the 76th Maintenance Wing will hire 500 new employees.

Oklahoma County used a voter-approved, \$45 million bond sale and \$10 million from the state Legislature to purchase the facility last year, two years after GM closed the facility and laid off about 2,200. The county leases the plant to the Air Force for \$1 a year.

Proponents said buying the plant was essential to help Tinker be more efficient, which could help keep the facility off future Base Closure and Realignment Commission lists.

"Oklahoma is the only state where all five of its military installations have increased their missions," Inhofe said. "When you put together a \$54 million bond issue, they said, 'Look, these guys are putting up their own money. There's no reason to close them.'"

State officials are keenly interested in keeping open Tinker Air Force Base, the state's largest single-site employer, with about 25,000 workers.

It has an annual statewide economic impact of about \$3.4 billion, said Meacham, who was involved in negotiations with GM to buy the plant.

"If you want to be successful in this world today you have to be competitive,"

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Meacham said. "Even GM was quite eager to get this facility back in productive hands."

The complex sits on 407 acres, which include six industrial buildings and one office building. It has almost 4 million square feet of usable space, 2.5 million of which is taken up by the complex.

Since acquiring the plant, the Air Force has spent about \$22 million on renovations, including lighting, reflective floor coverings and upgrades to comply with fire and Americans with Disabilities Act codes.

"We are looking forward to moving additional workload into Building 9001 and the flexibility that the facility brings to the ALC (Air Logistics Center) for meeting the current and future needs of our primary customer — the warfighters," said Col. Randall Burke, Oklahoma City Air Logistics Center Plans and Programs director.

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