

Future of Flight takes off

About 857,000 have visited the center so far, with the millionth visitor expected next year, officials say.

By Michelle Dunlop, Herald Writer

MUKILTEO — The past five years haven't gone exactly to plan at the Future of Flight Aviation Center and Boeing Tour.

"The plan kind of went out the door the first day," said Barry Smith, center director.

There have been disruptions: a labor strike at Boeing and a major economic downturn. There have also been unexpected successes: A diversified customer base has kept visitors flowing in; a runway linking the center to Paine Field has allowed Boeing and its customers to hold jet delivery ceremonies at the Future of Flight.

Today, the Future of Flight celebrates its fifth anniversary. Roughly 857,000 visitors have come through the aviation center's doors since it opened in 2006. Next year, Future of Flight expects to welcome its millionth visitor.

"I feel really good about where we are," Smith said.

It's a sentiment shared by representatives of the Boeing Co., which operates its Everett factory tours out of the center.

"We faced a number of challenges that we've been able to get through and were able to continue to provide a safe and secure tour that is highly satisfying," said David Reese, who oversees Boeing tour operations.

Boeing has seen twice the number of visitors that the company saw when it ran the tour on its own, Reese said. Since pairing with Future of Flight, the company has made some improvements to its tour. Boeing updated the signs it has on the balconies overlooking the factory floor. Boeing also is looking to add some hands-on displays, including ones that allow visitors to feel the materials used on the 787, Reese said.

"We had the opportunity to expand the tour, so visitors now go to two balconies and see three (plane) production lines," he said.

Both Boeing and Future of Flight officials have learned a lot about the center's visitors in the past five years. Initially, they focused more on visitor numbers. Today, Smith believes it's more effective to look at the kinds of visitors the center brings.

Only about one-third of the center's visitors are from Washington state, said Sandy Ward, marketing director. About 25 percent of ticket sales come from international visitors, with Canadians making nearly 10 percent of overall sales.

The international travelers are what Smith calls the "juicy" ones — the visitors who'll bring more tourism dollars into the county by spending the night, dining out, and buying gifts from local retailers. Over the last five years, visitors like these have reportedly spent \$69 million in the county.

The Future of Flight and Boeing Tour play a significant role in the county's new tourism plan. The goal of the new plan is to not only attract more visitors to Snohomish County but also to get those visitors to stay overnight so they spend more. The aviation-themed attractions around Paine Field, including Future of Flight, will be marketed together.

"There's just too much to see in one day," Ward said.

Besides the center's gallery and the tour, the Future of Flight also serves as a special event and conference site with space for as many as 750 people. In recent years, the center has served as a delivery site for Boeing customers coming to collect their new aircraft. The center averages about two aircraft delivery events each month, Smith said.

Boeing and the Future of Flight are working together to make the facility the venue of choice for Boeing customers to take delivery of their aircraft, Reese said. As the number of deliveries held at Future of Flight increases, the center will continue to operate tours even if participants can't browse through the exhibits.

"We think it will be exciting for people to be able to see the new plane and the airline customer," Reese said.

Future of Flight's Smith is also focused on boosting the center's educational programs. Visitors will be able to get more information and in different ways about the gallery's exhibits. The center will be looking at alternative energy exhibits, including installing a car-charging station and a windball, a small round turbine to produce electricity.

"I'm trying to get more future in the Future of Flight," Smith said.

Anniversary tour

To celebrate the five-year anniversary, tickets today are \$5.

Tours operate at 9, 10 and 11 a.m., 1, 2 and 3 p.m.

Shops at the center will be offering discounts and free gift wrapping.

For more information, visit futureofflight.org.

The Future of Flight Aviation Center & Boeing Tour is open from 8:30am – 5:30pm daily except Thanksgiving, Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Tours of the Boeing Assembly Plant operate daily at 9, 10, 11am and 1, 2 and 3pm.

Future of Flight Aviation Center & Boeing Tour, 8415 Paine Field Blvd., Mukilteo, WA 98275, 425-438-8100, www.futureofflight.org