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City, county welcome 'Superbase'

BY NATHAN WHEELER
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

MT. VERNON — Local officials are calling the installation of an Air-Evac Superbase another step in the economic growth of the area.

Following a groundbreaking ceremony for the Superbase Thursday afternoon at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport, Jefferson County Board Chairman Ted Buck said, "This is a great opportunity for Jefferson County and the community of Mt. Vernon. It's going to bring more economic development. This is just the start of things that are going to happen out here at this airport."

Andy Arthurs, director of base operations for Air-Evac, said, "We are putting in an extremely large hangar and additional maintenance staff."

Air-Evac Facilities Coordinator Blake Osgood said the Superbase will include a 2,600-square-foot hangar, a 3,200-square-foot helipad big enough for two "birds" to land

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Sentinel Photo/NATHAN WHEELER

GROUND BREAKING — A ceremony was held Thursday afternoon to introduce the community to a new Air-Evac Superbase at Mt. Vernon Airport expected to be completed by June. The Superbase will be a regional maintenance facility for Air-Evac's operation, which spans 11 states, according to Andy Arthurs, Air-Evac's base operations director. **FROM LEFT** are Jefferson County Board Chairman Ted Buck; Mt. Vernon Mayor David Keen; Arthurs, Joe Grygiel and Feron Ice with Air-Evac; and City Councilman John Howard.

Superbase:

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safely, two 2,500-gallon fuel tanks and a crew facility equipped with bedrooms and an office.

Construction of the Superbase, which Arthurs said will cost somewhere in the ballpark of \$175,000, should be done by June 1, Osgood said.

"That's what I'm shooting for ... without unforeseen headaches," Osgood stated. One headache is that it costs more to build in Illinois, he explained. But Arthurs pointed out that the centralized location of Mt. Vernon and Illinois was a key deal-maker for the installation of the regional maintenance facility, capable of providing maintenance to eight helicopters at a time and offering service to bases scattered throughout Air-Evac's 11-state territory.

"This is going to be one of the finest bases. It's going to be the best-looking base,"

Osgood said.

Buck commended airport manager Chris Collins and the Airport Authority Board, particularly Chairman Alan Hale, for doing the things necessary to foster the arrival of the Air-Evac Superbase.

"This is going to be the best aviation hub in Southern Illinois," Buck said.

At the groundbreaking ceremony, familiar faces for local economic development, as well as city and county officials, manned shovels alongside representatives of Air-Evac and the Airport Authority.

They included Rend Lake Small Business Development Center director Curt Mowrer, Mary Ellen Bechtel with the Jefferson County Economic Development Corporation, Melody King and Wayne Groti with St. Mary's Good Samaritan Hospital, Joe Grygiel with Air-Evac, Luann Knight with Salem Township Hospital, Airport Authority Board Chairman Alan Hale, Buck, Mt. Vernon Mayor David Keen, Andy Arthurs, Air-Evac nursing manager Feron Ice,

City Councilmen John Howard and Rick Heck, Crossroads Community Hospital director Greg Simms and City Manager Roy Payne.

In addition to saying the Superbase is "great news" for local citizens, the Airport Authority and Air-Evac, Keen recalled a situation in which Air-Evac's everyday role in life-saving operations touched his own family.

Keen's uncle, who he said saved his life when he was 6 or 7 years old, was having a heart attack as local doctors called for his transfer to another facility.

"He was immediately airlifted to St. Louis," Keen said. "It was fortunate Air-Evac was available to take him over there."

"On behalf of Air-Evac, thank you," Arthurs said while addressing the crowd of spectators who gathered at Thursday's introductory ceremony. "We consider this a long-term home."