

Sleepy Seletar? Soon, it won't be



POTENTIAL: Some suggestions include having Seletar Airport improved with a new aircraft landing system and extended runway.

Possible revamp for airport; analysts in favour of upgrade to cater to private jets

BY ARTHUR POON

SINGAPORE'S Seletar Airport could undergo a major revamp and work could start as early as next year.

The Straits Times understands that several government agencies are involved in the airport study, including the Economic Development Board and the Civil Aviation Authority of Singapore (CAAS). A decision is expected at the Asian Aerospace air show in February.

The former military airbase — which was also Singapore's first airport, completed in 1929 — saw more than 3,000 planes touch down last year. It is home to a handful of maintenance, repair and overhaul companies, flight training schools, private charter flight operators and medical evacuation services.

Accessible by Jalan Kayu and the Tampines Expressway, the airport has only one airline operating daily scheduled

flights. Malaysian-owned Berjaya Air flies holidaymakers to Malaysian resort islands like Pulau Tioman and Pulau Redang.

Those in the industry interviewed by The Straits Times are all in favour of upgrading the airport.

Aviation consultant Prithpal Singh said Seletar could be a business aviation hub for private jets and chartered planes, as well as a base for maintenance, repair and overhaul facilities.

Mr Logan Ravishankar, sole owner of Seletar-based MyJet Asia which operates mainly chartered flights, said: "Singapore's corporate aviation business has easily grown 10 per cent in the last two years. Developing Seletar will be instrumental for private jet and chartered flight businesses to soar in Singapore."

Seletar, he said, could complement Changi Airport, which currently serves 83 airlines and handles about 4,000 weekly flights.

Seletar needs a new aircraft landing system to become an "all-weather" airport, said Mr Singh. The runway also has to be extended by 400m from the

existing 1.63km, through land reclamation, and the terminal building upgraded for better service, said those in the aviation industry.

Mr David Ho, executive director of the Seletar-based private jet operator Executive Jets Asia, wants more.

He said Changi's Business Aviation Centre (BAC), opened in March 2002 to cater to private jet-setters, should be moved to Seletar.

Said Mr Ho: "Having a BAC in a busy international airport is not ideal as it holds up large commercial traffic and leads to congestion. Customers also don't like to land at big airports and prefer to be discreet when whisking through Customs."

Mr Ravishankar added that Singapore still lags behind Hong Kong and Macau, because services at Changi's aviation centre do not provide value for money.

It costs a private jet US\$3,500 (S\$5,950) to land at the centre, he said. While Macau charges US\$2,000 and Hong Kong's fee is US\$3,900, Mr Ravishankar argued their facilities and services are much better than Changi's.

Last year, just 20 private jets

used the aviation centre each month, according to the CAAS.

Seletar Airport is steadily building up its maintenance and training capabilities.

The Air Transport Training College, the training arm of the Singapore Institute of Aerospace Engineers, converted a 1,700 sq m hangar — about one-third the size of a football field — into a workshop last August and renamed it Seletar Skills Centre to give apprentices hands-on experience fixing airplane parts and engines.

Earlier this year, Singapore Technologies Aerospace opened its new \$12 million hangar at Seletar, capable of simultaneously handling two narrow-body aircraft for its budget carrier clients AirAsia, Valuair and Jetstar Asia.

The company operates its helicopter and Learjet private jet charter services from the Seletar Airport, as well as aircraft maintenance services.

A spokesman for ST Aerospace said: "We welcome the Government's initiative for development of the Seletar Airport and we certainly look forward to the opportunity to expand our operations."

arthurp@sph.com.sg