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By THOMAS WEST

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NASHUA – About 30 federal, state and local officials gathered Monday for a ceremony to kick off construction of a new \$16 million runway at Nashua Airport, but economics, not flying, was their main interest.

"When you think about the state of the economic times we've experienced, to see a project like this get started is quite a blessing," said Mayor Donnalee Lozeau.

The runway, expected to be finished late next year, has been in the discussion stage for decades.

Nashua Airport Association Chairman Don Davidson, a former mayor, recalled how the airport dates back to the 1930s when his father, Leon, was among the local aldermen who purchased the property on Pine Hill Road and helped make the facility the reality.

Since then, Davidson, a former airline pilot, his son and grandson have all learned to fly at Boire Field, he said.

Funding for the project will come primarily from the Federal Aviation Administration and state Department of Transportation.

The new, 6,000-foot runway is being built next to the existing 5,500-foot runway, which it will replace. The extra 500 feet of length will allow a greater margin of safety, as well as allowing commercial jets to take off with full tanks and more passengers, or on transatlantic flights. Currently, five jets are based at the airport.

Monday morning's ceremony, which started with the cutting of a ceremonial ribbon in the airport's main hangar and was followed by a tour and lunch for officials, was by invitation only for security reasons.

Construction will create about 45 skilled jobs that will last about a year, officials said.

Many speakers argued the airport remains an essential asset to the city in terms of economic growth.

Chris Williams, director of the Greater Nashua Chamber of Commerce, said the airport brings \$22 million in business to the region each year.

"It's pretty amazing to see what an economic engine this field is," he said.

"It's the centerpiece for aviation and this economy," said U.S. Rep. Charlie Bass. "It will have an impact on the viability of the economy of this entire region."

Gov. John Lynch was scheduled to attend the event but had to cancel because of the statewide weather emergency, Davidson said.