

# Airport hangars available for trade shows

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Don't think of it as a hangar. Think of it as convention space.

With the Executive Inn Rivermont and its 40,000-square-foot Exposition Center closed, several trade shows have left Owensboro in the past six weeks -- unable to find enough floor space for their events.

"We have three contiguous hangars at MidAmerica Jet with 45,000 square feet," Matt Hayden, president of Gulfstream Enterprises, which owns the charter air service, said Tuesday. "And there's another 10,000 square feet within 40 feet of those hangars."

"We can make the space available," said Drew Augenstein, chief operating officer for Gulfstream. "We'd hate to see Owensboro lose any more of these events."

"I'm not sure that our space isn't better than what they had before" at the Executive Inn, Hayden said. "We have high ceilings, wide and tall doors, and there are no posts in the middle of the floors."

And, he said, "we don't have barriers in our parking lot."

That was a reference to the barriers that Ryan McDaniel erected two years ago after he bought part of the hotel's parking lots from then-owner John Bays.

Using the hangars for trade shows and other large gatherings "makes so much sense you wonder why nobody thought of it before," Mayor Tom Watson said.

"That would be great for the boat show, the farm show and other big events in the winter," he said. "It's easily accessible, has plenty of parking and everybody knows where the airport is."

MidAmerica Jet's largest hangar has a long history of being used for community -- mostly political -- events.

In 1988, U.S. Sen. Dan Quayle drew an estimated 1,200 people to a rally there in his bid for the vice presidency. And then-Texas Gov. George W. Bush drew 2,000 for a presidential campaign rally in 2000.

Elizabeth Dole, Pat Robertson, Strom Thurman and Charlton Heston have also addressed rallies there.

"We're excited about any opportunity like this," said Karen Miller, executive director of the Owensboro-Daviess County Convention & Visitors Bureau.

But she wondered about chairs, tables and other trade show amenities.

"If we know they're coming and we have a contract, we don't mind spending money to make it happen," Augenstein said.

"The space is heated in the winter," Hayden said. "And if we can be assured of business next summer, I'll even air-condition it."

Watson said it will likely be three to five years before a convention center will be ready in downtown Owensboro.

"I'm all for using the hangars," he said. "We can continue to bring people in out there as long as its needed."

Hayden said: "We have 10 buildings at the airport. We can rearrange our planes for other events. But commitment is the key to making this work."

People interested in booking the airport space for gatherings can call Hayden at 663-2325.