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California dreaming

Meridian breaks ground at Hayward

Having won award after award on the east coast with its FBO at Teterboro Airport, and with clients constantly travelling to the San Francisco Bay area, in 2014 Meridian decided to take the plunge and develop a full blown west coast FBO and aircraft management operation.

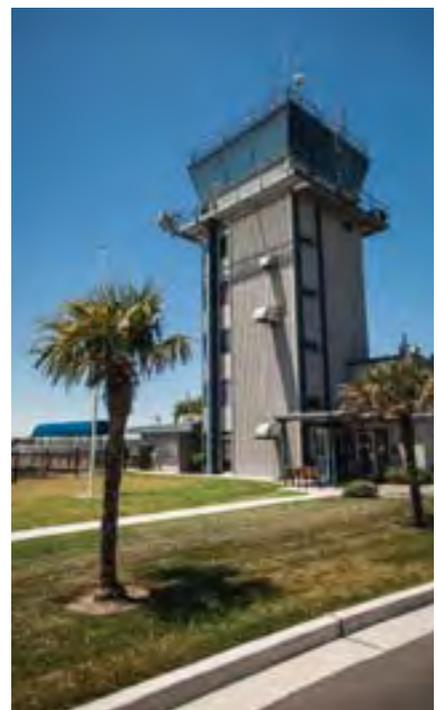
On 1 January 2014 Ken Forester, CEO at Meridian signed a 50 year lease with Hayward Executive Airport, the former WWII fighter base, now dedicated to business aviation. The airport itself has over 540 acres of land, and Meridian's lease is for 15 acres, with plans for a full-service FBO and hanger facility. On 4 August this year work on the foundations began, preceded by a ground breaking ceremony on the site.

The company's expansion to the west coast began in 2012 with the opening of a charter sales office at San Jose International Airport. This was followed up by with a second sales of-

fice in November of that year, at Sonoma County Airport in Santa Rosa.

As Forester explains, the expansion to the west coast is a natural and logical progression. "Many of our clients at Teterboro have business interests and connections in the San Francisco area. Plus, of course, there are a good many businesses in the Bay area and the surrounding region that run their own jets, including the Silicon Valley folk, the venture capital firms and the big technology companies like Apple. The region is also home to a significant number of high net worth individuals who either own their own jets or who charter. All these people use business aircraft a good deal, and charter frequently, so there is an excellent hinterland there for us to develop into," he told EVA.

As a location, Hayward has a lot to offer, Forester says. The airport is on the east side of the San Francisco Bay, about seven miles south of Oakland airport. Straight over the San Mateo Bridge takes visitors straight into Stanford and



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 Ken Forrester

Menlo Park, along with Palo Alto and other key business and high tech districts. "Quite a few of the high tech firms are now basing themselves in San Francisco, so it is a very exciting area, with a lot going on. The great thing about Hayward is there is no commercial traffic here and no curfew, plus there is very easy ramp access and the airport itself is very good."

"The north side of the airport has been well developed for years now. There is an FBO there, ATP Jet Center, but it is nothing like we are building here on the south side of the airport. We're going to be developing the site in two phases. In the first phase, which we have now begun building, we will have a 6,300 square foot terminal, a 30,000 square foot hangar and 3.5 acres of ramp space. The next phase will see us adding another 12,000 square feet of terminal space and two further 40,000 square feet hangars. Plus we plan to increase our ramp area by a further seven acres," Forrester comments.

The Bay area itself has four major airports, with further airports at Santa Rosa and Napa Valley. The only corporate airfield, however, apart from Hayward, is SFO, which is a huge commercial airport. (FYI, San Jose and Oakland also accept corporate traffic, which are close to Hayward.)

Meridian has already hired its west coast Director of Business Development, Greg Johnson, who is overseeing the building of the FBO and related facilities. The build and design company responsible for the Hayward FBO is Tectonic Management Group, out of Denver.

"From the start we decided we wanted a world class FBO, of the same high standard as our Teterboro FBO. Right now we are getting the foundations and footings in and if the weather holds we

are looking for completion by 1 August 2016. We are always a little skeptical on build completion dates, but I expect to be open for business by Labor Day 2016 (5th September), and possibly a month earlier than that if all goes well. Snow, of course, is not an issue on the coast in California but they are promising us an unusually heavy El Niño rainy season, with a lot of snow pack up in the mountains. However, this is California, so the weather is not likely to be a huge factor," Forrester says.

Once fully operational Meridian Hayward will offer fuel, maintenance services, great passenger and crew facilities and other amenities. It will be the West Coast base for Meridian Air Charter and Meridian Aircraft Management.

Forrester says that he and his team are already having some very fruitful and promising conversations with aircraft owners and operators in the region, including some corporates with their own jets. "By the time Meridian Hayward opens its doors we are hoping to have a reasonable client base already set up here, with say five or six airplanes under management. It is likely that some of those aircraft will be based in San Jose and possibly other airports, but some will want to move directly to our hangars here. Right now we have one mid-sized aircraft, one super-mid and a couple of large cabin jets that are likely to join our managed fleet. Our history as an aircraft management company is heavily weighted towards large cabin aircraft, so this is where most of our leads are taking us," he says.

In preparation for the opening at Hayward, Meridian have already hired a charter sales person based in Orange County LA, just a 45 minute flight away from Hayward. "That gives us a solid reach into Southern California while Hayward is a great base for our central and northern California sales operations. We're keen to cover the entire state. There is a tremendous amount going on here, and it is a very exciting place to be," Forrester concludes. ■



Hayward
 Executive
 Airport