

San Diego breaks ground on \$100 million revamp of Brown Field airport in Otay Mesa

The upgrades and streamlined customs processing are expected to make it more appealing as a reliever airport to congested San Diego International Airport

By David Garrick

SAN DIEGO — San Diego officials broke ground Monday on \$100 million in upgrades to Otay Mesa's Brown Field that could turn the underused 880-acre airport into an economic catalyst for the region.

The project is the first part of a four-phase development plan that will include a modern terminal, a new customs inspection facility, dozens of commercial hangars and more than a million square feet of retail space.

"Brown Field has served this city extremely well for a very long time, but the fact of the matter is it's time to step it up a couple notches," Mayor Todd Gloria said during the groundbreaking ceremony.

Long-stalled plans to dramatically upgrade the municipal airport got a major boost two years ago from Industrial Realty Group, a developer with a track record of reviving underutilized sites.

"I believe this airport will look nothing like this in the future," Stu Lichter, IRG president and founder, said during the groundbreaking.

IRG agreed in 2022 to buy 43 percent of the long-planned Metropolitan Airpark project from the original developer.

The Federal Aviation Administration approved the planned upgrades to Brown Field in 2021, shortly after the city completed a comprehensive analysis of the project's potential effects on the surrounding area.

Over the next five years, the 331-acre project is slated to get about \$14.8 million in federal airport capital improvement grant funding to pay for infrastructure and security.

"For me, sitting in D.C. seeing all this money go out, it's great to be here just to see something tangible happening," Richard Swayze, the FAA's deputy associate administrator of airports, said during the groundbreaking.

The upgrades and streamlined customs processing are expected to make Brown Field more appealing as a reliever airport to congested San Diego International Airport.

The project is the latest boost for Otay Mesa, which has more acreage of undeveloped industrial land than anywhere else in the city of San Diego.

Sandwiched between Chula Vista and the U.S.-Mexico border, the community has experienced significant growth in recent years that includes new housing developments and many commercial projects.

A new border crossing is also under construction there. And Otay Mesa is also home to the Cross Border Xpress, a popular bridge over the border from San Diego to the international airport in Tijuana.

While the first new buildings at Brown Field are slated for completion by the end of next year, the overall project, now called San Diego Airpark, is anticipated to be built over 20 years.

City officials said the upgrades are expected to create about 2,500 new airport jobs and have a \$1.5 billion economic impact on the San Diego region.

“Today’s groundbreaking symbolizes not just the start of construction, but the beginning of a new era for Brown Field,” said Jorge Rubio, the city’s chief of airports.

Roughly 80,000 flights come in and out of Brown Field annually. Flights there include private, corporate, charter, air ambulance, law enforcement, firefighting, flight training and cargo.

The upgrades are expected to significantly boost those numbers.

City officials have praised the architectural plans as “representative of the bi-national region’s rich heritage” and “inspired by prominent architectural structures from the area.”

The project, which could eventually include a hotel and restaurant, requires the developer to build a road across the northeastern boundary of the airport from La Media Road to federal property nearby.

San Diego officials have focused on modernizing the city’s two smaller airports — Montgomery-Gibbs Field in Kearny Mesa and Brown Field — since a 2015 city audit said years of mismanagement had made them both underused eyesores.

The audit said both airports had the potential to generate significant revenue and become economic engines if managed properly.

Brown Field opened in 1918 when the Army established an aerial gunnery school there to relieve congestion on Coronado’s North Island. In 1962, the Navy transferred ownership of Brown Field to the city with the condition that it remain a public airport.