Business, Page 1D
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Aviation, aerospace sectors growing in state

By Liam Marlaire
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Bill Watson took the entrepreneurial plunge in the late 1970s.

He developed a low-cost, reliable gyroscope, quit his job in Virginia and moved to the Chippewa Valley in 1980 to fine-tune and manufacture the product. Today he oversees Watson Industries, which makes gyro products and systems that are used to stabilize cameras over football fields and antennas on cruise ships or to control unmanned aircraft. Gyroscopes are mechanical devices that maintain or measure orientation.

"It took many years to develop a base of sales that would sustain the company because it was a radical design and Watson Industries was unknown," Watson said.

The company grew rapidly in the 1990s but suffered setbacks early in the next decade as a result of the dot-com crash. Today Watson Industries has nine employees in Eau Claire and is a member of a growing aviation/aerospace industry in Wisconsin. Watson credits the company's longevity to taking "great care to diversify our products and markets."

"Wisconsin businesses are already important players in the aerospace and aviation industry in the areas of original equipment manufacturing, energy, research and engineering," said Paul Jadin, CEO of the Wisconsin Economic Development Corp., during a business forum at the Experimental Aircraft Association's recent 2012 AirVenture Oshkosh event. "I believe Wisconsin can be an important player in the supply chain for aerospace and aviation businesses around the world."

Engineered Propulsion Systems of New Richmond was an exhibitor at AirVenture. The company was formed in 2006 to develop, manufacture and market a new diesel general aviation engine.

"The EPS engine sets new standards for fuel economy and performance through its revolutionary light-weight, Flat-Vee engine design using internationally available jet fuel," reads the company's promotional materials. "EPS has sought input from leading U.S., European, and Australian aircraft manufacturers and utilized constructive critique to improve our concept. This approach resulted in significant endorsements and provisional purchase orders. ... The response has been overwhelmingly positive."

EPS has 10 employees and intends to push that figure to more than 100 over the next three years.
"We do see an opportunity to grow the aviation and aerospace industries in Wisconsin," said Steven Weinzierl, vice president and chief technology officer. "Our business model focuses on high-quality, high-technology manufacturing.

"We intend to grow our manufacturing company to occupy a key position in this niche market."

Statewide developments include Kestrel Aircraft announcing it would move its headquarters to Superior from Brunswick, Maine, creating 600 jobs by 2016. The company produces single-engine turboprop planes.

Morgan Aircraft has committed to invest $105 million by 2015 as it establishes a world headquarters, research and development, and manufacturing facility in the town of Sheboygan Falls.

More than 140 Wisconsin suppliers work with Boeing, according to WEDC. UW-Stout has had students and instructors work with NASA on several programs.

"Engineering and research programs through UW-Oshkosh, Milwaukee, Madison, Platteville and Stout are finding answers to satellite weather data, aerospace clothing, rocket fuels, conductivity and materials," Jadin said.

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