INSTITUTE WILL HELP DEVELOP NEW LEARJET 85

NIAR contract worth up to $20 million

BY MOLLY McMILLIN
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In a piece of good news for the local aviation industry, Wichita State’s National Institute for Aviation Research will have a significant role in developing Bombardier Learjet’s new Learjet 85 business jet. It is the single-largest research contract in Wichita State history — expected to total between $10 million and $20 million, NIAR executive director John Tomblin said Wednesday.

“We’re still developing jets to propel us into the future,” Tomblin said. “The technology for these new airplanes will be used for our future economic development here in the city.” Bombardier joined with NIAR because of its long experience working with aircraft manufacturers and composites, said Ivan Vlatko, the chief integrator for the Learjet 85 at Bombardier. The midsize jet will be the first Learjet to incorporate an all-composite structure. NIAR is known for its composite material research and certification capabilities. It is the lead institution in the Federal Aviation Administration’s Center of Excellence for Composites and Advanced Materials and performs the majority of the FAA’s composite research.

That experience is “a key to success.”

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for our program,” Vlatko said. “It makes sense for us to work together.”

The contract with NIAR will last at least four years and “maybe beyond,” Vlatko said.

It’s too soon to say how the work will affect NIAR employment, Tomblin said.

Under the agreement with Bombardier, NIAR will provide material and structural testing and be involved in the FAA’s certification of the testing. The entire scope of the work has not yet been defined, Vlatko said.

The contract will take advantage of NIAR’s capabilities from the testing of small composite samples — called coupons — to the structural certification of a full-scale aircraft, Tomblin said.

“What we’re doing is making sure the Learjet 85 will be one of the best aircraft made,” Tomblin said.

“Announcements like this today — particularly in the economic conditions that our industry is facing — underscore the need for research and testing, which will ensure our economic recovery in the future.”

Learjet has long supported technology advancements at NIAR, the company said. It has been a member of NIAR’s Industry Advisory Council since it started in 2002.

The Learjet 85 — an eight-passenger plane — is a new design that fits nicely between the company’s Learjet 60 and Challenger 300, the company has said.

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The Learjet 85 is expected to be certified and delivered in 2012 or 2013, the company has said.

Bombardier’s Wichita plant will do the final assembly, completions, flight testing and customer delivery. Eventually, it wants to deliver from 50 to 75 Learjet 85s a year, the company said in October.

NIAR’s biggest challenge on the project will be to meet the timelines so the jet is available to the market when it needs to be, Tomblin said.

When Bombardier launched the Learjet 85 program, it formed a partnership with Grob Aerospace of Switzerland to develop the structures and composite technology and build the first prototypes.

Learjet terminated the agreement with Grob last fall after Grob filing for insolvency. Bombardier officials said it would assume complete responsibility for the plane’s detail design and manufacturing of all primary and secondary structures, with much of the work occurring in Wichita.

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