

## 'An air port to the future'

Taylor 04.SEP.03

Pledging to help Tunica County get funding for future expansions at the facility, Senator Trent Lott met briefly with city and county officials and airport commissioners before addressing a large crowd gathered in the Tunica Air Center for the opening of the first phase of airport expansion.

Complete now are a new 5500-foot runway and the \$1.8 million air center. On the drawing board are another runway expansion to 7,000 feet by early next year and then to 8,500 feet in 2005; and a control tower, hangars, a commercial terminal and commercial apron projected by the end of 2004. All told, the Tunica Airport, when complete at a cost of \$38 million, will be able to serve the largest aircraft now in service.

Half in jest, Lott called the facility Tunica International Airport, saying, "If you're going to dream, you might as well dream big." And it was a day to celebrate dreams, both past and in the future. Airport Director Cliff Nash, County Administrator Ken Murphree, and Program and Projects Director Charlie Williams all praised Lott's role in securing the crucial federal funding and FAA support for the project. "If not for Trent Lott, there wouldn't be an airport," Murphree said. And Lott said when Tunica officials first approached him with the idea for an airport, he hardly believed it himself. Lott said he remembered coming to Tunica County "14 or 15 years ago and Supervisor Paul Battle took me to a field and said this was where casinos would be built. Turning to Paul Battle III, Lott said, "Your dad had a vision, maybe I couldn't see then. "You are an success story...an example of what needs to happen (all over) Mississippi," Lott said. "I believe a lot of communities will be emulating what we have in Tunica County."

Williams said he and other county officials called on Lott in Washington last January and got \$1.4 million additional funding. "As soon as we got home, people started calling, asking 'What's Tunica's extra money for?' We almost said, 'We don't know.'" Those extra dollars helped complete this phase of the project and go forward with constructing another 1,500 feet of runway.

Lott said that he was proud to be part of the success of the project, "but money doesn't mean anything without people on the ground to guide it."

Speaking in the public part of the program were Tunica Convention & Visitors Bureau Director Webster Franklin; airport director Cliff Nash; Airport Commission chairman Robert Williams; and Lott.

With rain threatening, Lott and his wife Tricia arrived in a Lear-type corporate jet from Jackson, MS, and took off from Tunica headed back to Washington. In closing remarks, Lott said he looked forward to flying in on a Southwest jet sometime in the near future. Nash presented Lott with an unusual token of the day: a Tunica blue-and-gold airport runway light, mounted on a wood base and engraved for the occasion. The special touch: the memorabilia is a working lamp!



Mayor Bobby Williams and aldermen, supervisors, airport commissioners, and other officials flank Sen. Trent Lott at September 2's 'blue ribbon' opening of the newly-expanded Tunica Airport. The city and county welcomed a large crowd from the region to celebrate the completion of the first phase of the \$38 million project.