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## Airport office project on smooth trajectory

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Between buzz and new leases, Southwest Florida International Airport's Skyplex has high hopes for 2020.

by: [Mark Gordon](#) | Managing Editor

The past year has been something of a coming out party for Florida airport expansions. Tampa International, to cite one example, is in the middle of phase two of a \$2 billion project that will touch just about every part of the airport,

from curbs to a \$110 million office tower.

Southwest Florida International Airport in Fort Myers has moved into the forefront of the expansion and upgrade conversation with Skyplex. It's a Class A commercial park/office project, on 1,150 acres next to the airport. The site of some \$100 million in development, through the summer Skyplex landed a pair of multibuilding office deals with major Southwest Florida employers, Gartner and Alta Resources, for nearly 700,000 square feet. Several other projects and leases are in various stages of development, Lee County Port Authority interim Executive Director Ben Siegel said in late November.

"We're doing actually much better than I thought we be doing at this point," says Siegel, named interim director of the airport authority in November, following former authority chief Jeff Mulder's departure. "Interest has continued to grow."

#### News maker update

**Entity:** Skyplex, Southwest Florida International Airport

**Location:** Fort Myers

**Principal:** Ben Siegel, Lee County Port Authority Interim Executive Director

**Outlook:** Skyplex is primed for a big year, in new leases and projects.

The latter half of 2019, in addition to fielding calls for projects, saw progress in one key part of the development: Skyplex Boulevard. A \$14 million project, with funds split between the airport authority and Florida, the half-mile road is on the north side of the airport. Lined with 70 royal palm trees, thousands of plants and a 60-foot diameter water fountain in the roundabout, the road runs from Daniels Parkway to Chamberlin Parkway. It also features a composite arch bridge system that is the first of its kind in

Florida, airport officials say.

The airport held a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the road Dec. 2. "I look at this as the main artery of Skyplex," Siegel says. "It sets the stage for the non-aviation development and hopefully will help propel Skyplex forward."

Like many airports across Florida, one motivating factor behind Skyplex is to capture other, and sustained, revenue sources — like leases — that can help the facility withstand the airline industry's ups and downs. That's part of the strategy at Tampa International, and, in another example, Charlotte County's Punta Gorda Airport sold land to food distributor Cheney Bros. Inc. for a major distribution hub.

At Southwest International, under the call letters RSW, the strategy is a little different. Skyplex land, for one, is strictly for lease — not for sale, based on Federal Aviation Administration guidelines. Rates are roughly between 15 cents and 25 cents per square foot, or between about \$6,500 and \$11,000 per acre. Also, the authority targets only Class A office users for its park, setting aside some 300 acres for aviation uses.

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**‘We’re doing actually much better than I thought we be doing at this point.’ Ben Siegel, Lee County Port Authority**

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One of the first announced Skyplex tenants, dating back to 2017, is business consulting firm Gartner, one of the largest private employers in Lee County. Gartner signed a deal to build a trio of office and amenity buildings on Skyplex land totaling 240,000 square feet.

Siegel says that deal led to conversations with Alta Resources Corp., a Wisconsin-based outsourcing support company. Alta, in early 2019, committed to develop a 90,000-square-foot call center and office in Skyplex, which will house as many as 1,000 workers. The planned three-story building, a \$21 million project, is in the permitting phase — and guiding it to completion is one of Siegel’s biggest priorities, he says. “Alta following Gardner was a big deal,” he says. “[Keeping] Alta on track will be really big for us in 2020.”



File. Ben Siegel was named interim director of the Lee County Airport Authority in November.

Even with all the buzz and deals, Siegel has some concerns. The list includes competition, the economy and the impact of the presidential election on consumer sentiment, all of which are interconnected. “We have some promising leads and opportunities on the leasing side,” Siegel says. “But there’s a lot of money out there for projects. And if the economy changes, that can certainly have an impact on us.”