

New manufacturing facility in Elizabeth City

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TCOM L.P., an international supplier of airships and lighter-than-air vehicles, broke ground Feb. 21 on the construction of a new 40,000 square-foot manufacturing facility in Elizabeth City.

The development represents a \$3 million expansion of TCOM's airship production and maintenance facility. On completion, the company will use the new facility to produce the mooring systems for unmanned, tethered balloons, known as aerostats, as part of an Army contract. Additionally, TCOM will develop and test an aerostat for an emergency communications system for use during natural disasters.

"This represents another milestone for Elizabeth City's burgeoning aviation-related industry," said Wayne Harris, director of the Albemarle Economic Development Commission (AEDC), which hosted the event in cooperation with the North Carolina Department of Commerce. "From the deployment of blimps that combated enemy submarines during World War II to the aerostat test flights underway in this new millennium, Elizabeth City has a history of launching news-making events."

The groundbreaking ceremony took place adjacent to the construction site in a historic 1942 hangar that was once part of the U.S. Naval Air Station. Longer than the Queen Elizabeth 2 luxury liner, and twice as wide, the hangar once launched Navy "K" airships during World War II. The airships, known as blimps, were instrumental in combating enemy submarines that prowled the coastline.

Since 1973, TCOM has operated at the Elizabeth City site. It is the only lighter-than-air company in the world to operate a facility devoted to aerostat and airship manufacture, assembly, flight test and training operations.

Used for surveillance, aerostats are helium-filled balloons that are winched up or down a combined tether/power line and can be deployed from trucks, land platforms or ships at sea. In addition to constructing the aerostats, TCOM uses the facility to design and construct envelopes for airships.

With its headquarters in Columbia, Md., TCOM has developed land- and sea-based aerostat programs for clients throughout the world.

Beginning in the 1980s, it provided large aerostat systems to U.S. Customs for the "War Against Drugs," and TCOM aerostat systems are now a critical part of air defense systems in Kuwait, Israel, India and Iraq.

The TCOM expansion was made possible in part by a \$70,000 One North Carolina Fund grant. The grant provides financial assistance through local governments to attract business projects that will

stimulate economic activity and create new jobs in the state.

Pasquotank County provided the match for the TCOM project by contributing \$10,000 and the installation of a new water line.

Other partners who helped make the announcement possible include the North Carolina Department of Commerce, North Carolina's Northeast Commission, Rural Economic Development Center, Small Business and Technology Development Center, N.C. State University's Industrial Extension Service and USDA Rural Development.

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