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USO Center Approved at Tampa International Airport

(TAMPA, FL) - The first chartered USO center approved in nearly 10 years will be built at Tampa International Airport. On January 18, the USO Board of Governors voted to approve the new USO Tampa Bay, Inc. center, thanks to the hard work of a team of volunteers from the Tampa Bay community.

Joe Lopano, CEO of Tampa International Airport, said he is delighted the project is moving forward.

"The military is a significant part of the Tampa community, with MacDill Air Force Base located here. All service men and women need to be recognized as the heroes that they are. The opening of the USO helps provide that recognition," he said.

City of Tampa Mayor Bob Buckhorn, who sits on the Aviation Authority's board of directors, is also pleased with the progress.

"Tampa is a city that celebrates and honors our military families. This is one more example," said the mayor.

Alan Reyes, USO Senior Vice President of Operations expressed his pleasure of the new independent location that will be added to the USO community.

"This is a real milestone for the USO and the Tampa Bay community. It takes a lot of work and dedication to make a new USO location a reality and this is a reflection of all the trust and commitment the USO Tampa Bay, Inc. team has built over the last few years to support our troops and their families. We look forward to all the programs and services they will bring to lift their spirits."

The center will be designed and built as part of the airport's \$20 million Main Terminal Modernization project already underway. The 1,100-square-foot space should be completed by July 1.

Walter Lamerton, a retired U.S. Air Force senior master sergeant who lives in Pasco County, spearheaded the project.

“I am honored to be a part of the Veterans Advisory Committees for U.S. Rep. Gus Bilirakis and U.S. Rep. Rich Nugent. These committees work tirelessly to enhance the lives of our actively serving military, our veterans and their families,” said Lamerton, who is the founding chairman of the USO Tampa Bay Board of Directors. “The USO Tampa Bay, Inc. center at Tampa International Airport will provide a ‘Home Away From Home’ for service personnel traveling through the airport, waiting for loved ones to return or seeing them off.”

Additionally, the center will offer a relaxed and quiet environment for military personnel and their families, Lamerton said. It will resemble a home, with a self-serve kitchen area, computer work stations, a place for making calls, a TV room and a quiet room for reading and relaxing.

It has the potential to serve over 300,000 actively serving military and their family members coming through the airport, according to the USO Tampa Bay, Inc. MacDill Air Force Base, located just south of TPA, is home to U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command and the 6th Air Mobility Wing.

“I proudly salute Tampa International Airport and the USO for working together for the best interests of our military service members and their families,” said Mike Prendergast, executive director of the Florida Department of Veterans’ Affairs. “Establishing a highly visible USO presence at Tampa International Airport will proudly showcase to the region’s many visitors that Florida is the most military and veteran friendly state in the nation.”

The annual operating budget of the USO Tampa Bay, Inc. totals approximately \$315,000, with additional funds needed for furnishing the space. The USO Tampa Bay, Inc. is looking to raise \$1 million to kick off the program, Lamerton said.

For information on how to support the project, go to www.ProjectTampa.org.

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The Aviation Authority began in 1945 as an independent special district governed by the Hillsborough County Aviation Authority Act. The act provides the Authority with exclusive jurisdiction, control, supervision, and management over all public airports in Hillsborough County. Although empowered to levy ad valorem property taxes, the authority has not collected any tax funds since 1973. Recognized as an industry leader in efficiency and convenience, Tampa International Airport continues to earn the most prestigious awards and honors and ranks among the top airports in the United States. With 200 daily departures and service to over 70 nonstop destinations, Tampa International Airport is the Gateway to Florida’s West Coast and your next great vacation.