Meeting Notes – Aug. 15, 2023

The LaFayette Rotary Club met for its weekly meeting on Tuesday, August 15, 2023, in the Fellowship Hall of the First Baptist Church of LaFayette. Rotarian Diane Sherriff invited as the guest speaker Mr. Richard Belk. Mr. Belk is currently the Director of Aviation Technology at the Southern Union Aviation Center, a division of Southern Union State Community College (SUSCC). His first experience in aviation was as an Aircraft Structural Repair Technician with the US Army. In that role he accomplished structural repairs on Army operated helicopters. After serving in the Army, he worked at various aircraft maintenance repair facilities and with various airlines in roles from structure mechanic to upper-level management. These jobs took Richard and his family to Los Angeles, Memphis, Omaha, Venice (Italy), Mobile, Baltimore, and Oklahoma City. Other responsibilities, such as Supervisor/Inspector have taken them to various domestic and international locations such as Tel Aviv, Israel; Ramsgate, England; and Rome, Italy. He spent twelve years with the Federal Aviation Administration and in his last three years there he managed instructional content for and instructed Aviation Safety Inspectors at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City. He retired in January 2022.

Mr. Belk spoke to the club about the new Aviation Maintenance Technology (AMT) program at Southern Union. This is a brand-new course of study beginning this fall semester on the Opelika campus of SUSCC. Only three other community college campuses offer this line of study: Coastal (Mobile), Enterprise, and Snead State (Boaz). Mr. Belk wrote all of the courses from scratch. In order to meet Airmen Certification Standards, there were 1,194 specific pieces of information or skills that had to be incorporated into the courses. The program is a two-year program, requiring the completion of 10 course, five courses each year, including summers. Each class earns five semester hours of credit and is completed within 5 weeks. Classes meet on Monday and Wednesday from 7:30-3:00 and on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Fridays from 7:30-12:00. Each class provides 135 clock hours of instruction. If a student misses more than 10 % of their class time they are withdrawn from the class. For every one hour of theory, students are provided two hours of lab time. Class size is limited to 25 students. Those students successfully completing the program will have the knowledge and skill level needed to pass the tests required by the FAA and will receive the Airframe and Powerplant Mechanic Certificate. This certificate will allow students to gain entry level employment in the aviation industry.

Alabama is the seventh largest employer of aviation mechanics. The average salary of an aviation mechanic in 2021 was $75,860. In 2022 the average was up to $81,290. The industry currently has a shortage of 35,000 mechanics.

Diane Sherriff