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March 23, 2007 - 12:00AM

Controversial charter firm no longer flying from GTP

CHARLIE KRAEBEL

A Smithfield-based air charter firm under fire for reputedly transporting terrorism suspects to countries where they could be interrogated and tortured may sell or lease its hangar at the state-owned Global TransPark airstrip.

GTP Marketing and Communications Manager Jennifer Russo said Aero Contractors, a tenant at the park since 2002, hasn't flown out of Kinston in four months and is looking for another company to take its place.

Aero has been under fire by human rights and faith-based organizations for supposedly transporting suspects seized by the CIA.

On Wednesday, a group of protesters led by the American Civil Liberties Union along with nearly two dozen state legislators held a news conference in Raleigh calling on Gov. Mike Easley to remove Aero from the GTP. The group is also calling for the state to investigate the company's supposed role in transporting terror suspects.

Easley and other state officials have been cool to requests for the investigation.

State House Rep. Van Braxton, D-Kinston, said it may be up to the federal government to investigate the matter because it involves the U.S government and military.

"I'm not sure if it's our place as a state government to investigate this," he said.

While Braxton said the federal government should be given "a little faith when it comes to protecting our country," he wondered why the government would use a civilian airport for such transports when there are several military bases close by.

Braxton said he doesn't know for sure that Aero is indeed ferrying terror suspects. Aero officials couldn't be reached for comment.

As far as Aero's status with the GTP, the company hasn't made any rental payments from its own coffers since November 2004. Instead, the company is working through about \$60,000 in credit Aero received for building a hangar in 2004 to house the Boeing business jet, GTP officials said.

The park charges the company \$1,075.77 a month to rent about five acres at the GTP.

Russo said GTP officials haven't looked into the claims against Aero, characterizing the park's association with the company simply as a "business relationship."

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