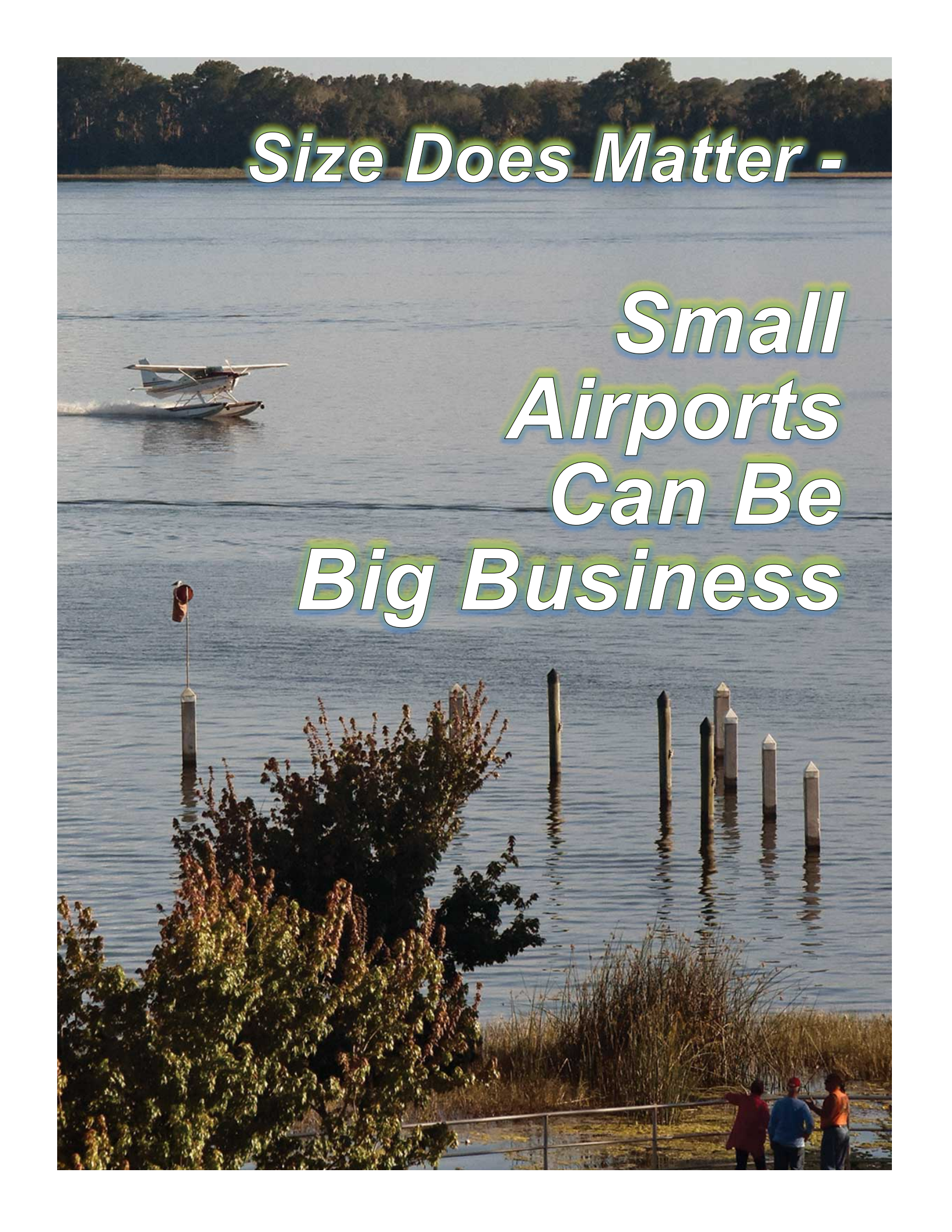


A photograph of a seaplane on a body of water. The seaplane is white with a blue stripe and is moving from left to right, leaving a white wake. In the background, there is a dense line of trees. In the foreground, there are several wooden pilings or markers in the water, and a large bush with green and brown leaves. Three people are standing on a path in the bottom right corner, looking towards the water. The text "Size Does Matter -" is overlaid in the top right in a white, italicized font with a blue outline and a green drop shadow.

Size Does Matter -

*Small
Airports
Can Be
Big Business*

Size Does Matter — Small Airports Can Be Big Business

By Mike Jones

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Sun-n-Fun 2019 down in Lakeland, Florida was a great event. More than 100,000 people walked through the gates. 500 exhibitors showed their goods, and both the static displays and the flying shows were stupendous. Given the energy, the dedication and the money at Sun-n-Fun, it's hard to believe that general aviation is in trouble. But it is.

More than anything, we need airports. Sadly, airports top the endangered-species list. Wikipedia lists 542 airports in the U.S. which have closed in the last few decades. AOPA endlessly rants about closures and threats.

The poster-child of lost airports is the charming Horace Williams Field, owned by the University of North Carolina since the 1940s, and now gone. Meigs Field was murdered in the dark of night by a Chicago gangster who happened to be the mayor. Charles Lindbergh departed from Roosevelt Field on his famous flight; you can still see the runway cutting through the parking lot of an enormous Long Island shopping center. Years ago I learned short-field techniques at the Mountain Meadow Airstrip in Burlington, CT; it's now a scrub-filled knoll, purportedly the victim of rising insurance premiums. Hawaii is trying to close G.A. airports, Santa Monica is on life-support, and even the charming Tacoma Narrows airport south of Seattle has been on and off death row. How depressing.



By lunchtime on both days of Seaplane-a-Palooza, the ramps and restaurants were jammed with sun-burned gawkers. Along the shore, dozens of boats pulled up and disgorged visitors, too.

Non-flyers claim that airports are dangerous, noisy and bad for the environment. They claim they're just playgrounds for rich old guys. Real estate builders hint brightly there are better uses for all that wonderful flat land, and government agencies look for new tax dollars. The future indeed looks dark if nothing is done.

Here's the simple truth: nobody will do anything, except pilots. We're the ones who need to defend our airports. The best defense is to be relevant and useful to the community, more useful than another sprawling subdivision. By relevant, I mean working with schools, business and governments to make each airport an essential, foundational element of each community's economy.

The economic benefits of airports — even small airports — are large and range far beyond the airport fences. Hundreds of thousands of jobs and billions of dollars in economic growth flow from our wings, ramps and hangars. But

airports won't survive without work. It's a story worth telling, so let's zoom in on two recent success stories.

Tavares, Florida

Years ago, Tavares was high on the short-list for the prettiest boring town in America. Comfortably ensconced on the north shore of beautiful Lake Dora, about an hour northwest of Orlando, it only grew oranges and mosquitos. The railroads missed it, as they generally skipped the soggy interior of the state. The real estate developers who decimated the coast avoided the swamp-filled center of the state. The citrus crop froze a couple of times. All this condemned Tavares — which on its best days never had touched the economic stratosphere — into polite but persistent penury. People moved away, unemployment was 11% and the streets were lined with vacant storefronts.

Then, about a decade ago the city fathers decided to take a flyer. Literally. The city spent about \$6 million on the initial construction of — wait for it! — a



It's shocking to see an otherwise normal pilot drive a multi-million dollar Caravan intentionally into the water!

seaplane base, right in the center of town. Subsequently they invested an additional several million more over the past decade. In return, this has created economic growth in new jobs, new businesses and rising real estate values. The proof is in the numbers: unemployment is down to 3.8%. The city's population has doubled to over 16,000. Even the county and government offices have been moved, creating space downtown for more businesses.

According to Bob Tweedie, Tavares Director of Economic Development, around 2007 the community came together and started to discuss a more optimistic future. They did a “strengths and weaknesses” analysis, hired consultants, and started work on “visioning” a new perspective for Tavares.



There's no disputing the magic of seaplanes, especially at sunset, as another of the Jones Bros. Cessnas returns to its roost.

John Drury was the new City Administrator during this time. He and another executive were sitting in the sole surviving restaurant downtown, having lunch, when two seaplane pilots “walked in with muddy feet.” They had landed on the lake but had to wade through snake-filled muck to get to dry

land. This clicked with Drury, who happened to be a seaplane pilot. He realized Tavares' undeveloped beach on Lake Dora could be the key to Tavares' future. "The lightbulb just came on about the idea of a seaplane base," Tweedie said.

The town dug deep and found some money. Starting in 2010, they developed a mix of amenities to attract both visitors and businesses, including a park, parking, ramps and docks. The town established an FBO and the FAA put the seaplane base on charts (designator "FA1"). They installed fueling stations with both 100LL and autogas. A public lavatory built in the design of a dirigible hangar became a local attraction. They recruited a plucky Part 135 charter company, Jones Brothers Seaplanes, to offer training and rides. With an optimism completely out-of-touch with their dusty history they even trademarked the phrase "America's Seaplane City."

Amazingly, the plan worked. The entire town, flyers and non-flyers alike, has prospered. Business is booming. The goal is to sustain "a climate that's attractive to people and appealing to new businesses," Tweedie said.

All of the Jones Brothers planes at Tavares are Cessnas. Owned by Rob and Meghan Galloway, the company employs five pilots and three office staff. "We love our Cessnas," Rob explains. "We've got a 185 and two 206s. Those are our primary planes. Our 1946 Cessna 140 came from the factory on floats and has never been on wheels."

Neither Tweedie nor Galloway are surprised by the impact the seaplane base has had on the town. "In six or seven years, we went from one little downtown restaurant to over a dozen," Galloway said. "The park is new. The downtown resort [hotel] is all new. It's all so good."

The city didn't stop with pouring concrete. It pro-actively organizes about thirty events annually, including the largest classic boat show in the entire country. The core of the calendar is "Seaplane-a-Palooza." Intentionally scheduled right before Sun-n-Fun (it's nice to have famous neighbors) the 2019

Palooza drew 74 planes, two helicopters, hundreds of visitors and this happy reporter. Approximately twenty vendors exhibited their wares. There were several historic twin-engine birds, a dozen Cessnas, two Seabees, a stately Beaver impossibly high on its massive floats, and a wide variety of light-sport and ultra-light water-birds. Dozens of boaters came from other towns around the lake to watch, eat and spend. With so many planes and three different flying contests, there was more than enough action to keep everybody engaged.

Airplanes and Golf

500 miles north of Tavares, Bostonian James Walker Tufts basically created modern golf in America in 1897 when he laid out the first golf course in Pinehurst, then an impossibly remote section of central North Carolina famous for nothing but pine tar and sandy soil. At almost the same moment and only 250 miles to the east, two crazy bicycle makers made their historic first flights riding the blustery winter winds of the Outer Banks. This was a serendipitous match made in the air, if not in heaven.

The Tufts family was all about business (James Tufts was the inventor of the soda fountain). When they saw their first airplane they saw the potential. They built “Knollwood Airport” in 1929 to serve their Pinehurst resort. Today, the Pinehurst Airport (now named the Moore County Airport, designator “KSOP”) punches above its weight. According to a recent study, the Pinehurst airport contributed 305 local jobs and \$17,300,000 in direct economic benefits, and paid \$1,269,000 in local taxes. That’s pretty impressive for an airport with only 6,000 operations annually.¹

¹ The Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE) at North Carolina State University bi-annually quantifies the benefits of all the N.C. airports in an analysis of the “total economic impact” of the 72 airports in the state. Leading the study is well-respected Dr. Daniel Findley, a Senior Research Associate at ITRE. Dr. Findley has more than 30 published, peer-reviewed technical papers on economics and transportation. To view the full report, including the breakdown of each individual airport’s statistics and contributions, at www.ncdot.gov/aviation.

Part of the goal is to serve as the aviation gateway for the golfing and equestrian communities in the region. Pat Corso, a member of the Airport Authority, explained the cost-benefit dynamics. “This airport is directly responsible for filling thousands of hotel rooms every year.”



No festival is complete without a food court, and this event offered a plethora of choices. Kelli, Aubrey and Scott Ferguson of Pinehurst enjoy their lunch while watching the arriving aircraft.

But the airport doesn't stop at just creating jobs for other companies; it works to promote aviation in general. The airport hosts its own small airshow called the “Festival D’Avion” each April. It draws visitors from all over the state. Despite the

challenges of some awkward weather in 2019, about 4,000 people and 60 vendors participated in the 2019 edition.

“Those who braved the elements were treated to several magnificent moments during the Festival,” Peter Stillwell wrote. Stillwell is president of Tarheel Communications which organized the Festival. There was a concert, military and private aircraft displays, kids climbed on antique fire engines and the local car club featured vintage vehicles. There were two precision skydiving events and flyovers provided by the Bandit Flight Team. The event saluted a local survivor of the attack on Pearl Harbor and watched a 96-year old wheel-chair-bound veteran take one last flight in a classic biplane provided by Ageless Aviation. It was perfect — maybe even better than perfect.

The Pinehurst airport supports a large variety of aviation-related activities such as pilot training, airplane maintenance, a new Civil Air Patrol squadron, STEM programs at the local schools and a flying program at the local community college.



At Pinehurst's Festival d'Avion, the military was well represented with helicopters, a C-27 and most impressively with an Osprey, which opens and closes like a Swiss army knife

The airport set out rocking chairs with a view of the ramp and built a new observation area even closer to the runway which attracts dozens of airplane-watchers on sunny weekends. There's a wildly popular "Trunk or Treat" event every Halloween which brings a thousand kids to the airport. A busy EAA chapter flies hundreds of kids in Spring and Fall Young Eagles events. Pinehurst also is adjacent to Fort Bragg and is the location for dignified transfer ceremonies where the remains of soldiers and sailors are returned to their families.

How About Your Airport?

Big airports and big airshows grab most of the headlines; that's life. After all, 600,000 of us slog to Oshkosh like swallows returning to Capistrano — just to sleep in a damp tent. Sun-n-Fun is a treat but it's massive, too, with endless rows of exhibitors, displays and porta-johns. Necessary perhaps, but not exactly fun.



Photo, top: Another example of an airport's creative marketing is the Trunk-or-Treat event at Moore County Airport every Halloween afternoon. About 1,000 kids and parents came to the airport and collect candy from pilots. They planes are decorated with skeletons, witches and goblins. Photo, bottom: The Pinehurst airport actively seeks opportunities to work with the local schools and sponsored the summer "STEM Camp." Local businessman Dick Harpster built his own Velocity Elite XL and volunteered to show it to the campers. About 200 school kids were amazed at "the James Bond Airplane" which meant about 400 parents heard good things about the airport that week.

than just pour concrete. They need to develop an active portfolio of services

and events which are relevant to their community. Airports need to have an active web site, write press releases, and use social media so people are aware the airport is working for the town.

Programs don't have to be big and glamorous. Small events can be highly effective: they're less structured, with fewer fences, better parking, no wristbands and more surprises. They're also much more affordable.

Events break down the barriers between flyers and non-flyers. They help people realize the benefits of aviation reach far beyond the traffic pattern. To my mind, it doesn't get better than that.

About the Author



Dr. Mike Jones is a commercial-rated pilot based in Pinehurst, NC with about 4,000 hours in his logbook. His day job is helping small airports be more relevant to their communities by bolstering their total economic impact. You always can reach him at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.