

A photograph of a middle-aged man with white hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue suit, a light blue checkered shirt, and a purple and white striped tie. He is smiling slightly and looking towards the camera. Behind him is a light-colored wall. To his left, a circular gold seal is mounted on the wall. The seal features two figures, one standing and one seated, with the text "NORFOLK COUNTY" around the top and "APRIL 12, 1776" and "TOM MC" at the bottom. The text "Flying Your Airport Through Political Headwinds" is overlaid in a white, italicized serif font across the lower half of the image.

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Flying Your Airport Through Political Headwinds

By Mike Jones

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Here's a surprise for you: an article in an aviation magazine that's not about airplanes. My topic for the day is *symbiosis*, a biological term which describes long-term mutually supportive interactions between two different species.

Symbiotic relationships are unusual in three ways. First, they are non-competitive; one partner doesn't prosper at the detriment of the other. Second, symbiotic relationships are highly efficient; each partner brings different expertise to the situation. Third, symbiotic relationships are plentiful and not only are found in animals but in plants and even single-cell life forms.

A classic example is between sharks and remora. Remora are small salt-water fish which evolution has equipped with a suction cup at the top of their heads. They use it to attach themselves on to a passing shark. Once they have found a ride, life for a remora is pretty good. The shark protects them from predators, provides free transportation, and delivers nutritional scraps of food. In return, the remoras re-pay the shark by removing parasites from the shark's skin. Everybody wins.

Which is exactly the relationship between our local airports and the governments which own them. Airports and politicians are symbiotes in the convoluted process of governance.



The North Carolina state legislature is housed in this concrete castle in downtown Raleigh, NC; to my mind it looks more like a fitness club than a government building. Built in the 1960s, it neither imparts gravitas to visitors about the weighty decisions being made within nor does it offer any modern conveniences, such as well-designed security areas or convenient parking.

Every airplane needs an airport. If you recall from Doug Tilghman's epistles on airports published in this newspaper at the beginning of this year, there are about 20,000 airports in the FAA registry.

Only about 5,000 are public-access

airports, and 83% of

those are owned by towns, cities or counties. As public facilities, those airports depend upon the largess of city managers, county commissioners and state representatives to deliver funding and grants, which are the "scraps of food" airports need to prosper and grow.

Which leads to two very important questions for pilots like you and me. First, how does anybody get the attention of those busy decision-makers? Second, lacking a suction cup on the top of my head, what does it take to get them to scatter some greenbacks in the direction of my airport?

Airport Associations

For most general aviation airports, the process starts with a state airport association. Every state has one, and they're very gregarious because they

always are looking for ways to justify their functions and fees. Case in point: the North Carolina Airport Association is a first-rate organization here in my home state. It has an excellent staff, wonderful volunteers, and a highly professional board of directors. It publicizes new technologies and promotes best practices. It announces job openings and construction opportunities across the state. It sponsors an annual three-day symposium where weighty issues are debated during friendly rounds of golf. Most germane to today's topic, the N.C.A.A. lobbies for general aviation up at the state capital.

Governments are labyrinths intentionally designed to shield their activities from prying eyes. While lobbyists have terrible reputations, a good lobbyist is a friendly burglar who can unpick those legislative padlocks. Lobbyists help win funding, alert industry to invisible threats, try to defeat stupid rules, and generally secure a seat at the table for their clients. In terms of G.A. airports, while we may only get the scraps thrown on the floor, the plucky remora will remind you that scraps are better than nothing at all.

The N.C.A.A. Board sought to proactively reach out to our state legislators before they finalized next year's budget. They turned to our lobbyist who, it turns out, isn't a person but a company called KTS Strategies. KTS works for organizations and industries across the southeast. They arranged an "Airport Legislative Process Day" in April 2023. About a third of the member airports sent a spokesperson, including your intrepid reporter.

Early on the morning of April 16th, I memorized my four "talking points," fired up the Buick and headed north to Raleigh. Gluing the whole day together were two highly experienced KTS staffers, Hampton Billips and Amanda Honaker. Hampton and Amanda were superb guides; youthful, professional, engaging and very knowledgeable about the machinations of the legislature. After I explained my particular mission, Amanda took me under her wing to escort me to the different offices.

Foot in the Door

First discovery: North Carolina is blessed with the nation's ugliest Legislative Building. For a century we had a handsome and traditional granite edifice, but like an old Chevy it was traded-in for a low-slung slab of concrete in the 1960s. Remember the sixties — tie-dyed shirts, bell-bottom pants, the Bay of Pigs, Woodstock? None of them aged well and our legislative building has suffered the same fate. Compared to the high-rises around it, the legislature looks like a giant wad of pigeon-poop splattered into our handsome capital city. Who thought it was a good idea to put a cafeteria in an exhaust-filled parking garage? Or to have school groups with hundreds of children funnel through the same security screening as people trying to get to work? Or to fail to have secure inter-building access, forcing visitors out into the rain and through metal detectors six times in five hours? But I digress.

Second discovery: Our money isn't being wasted on extravagant legislative offices. In most instances, a legislator gets just two rooms. A legislative assistant sits in a claustrophobic anteroom jammed with a child's sized desk, a large screen full of urgent emails and a phone permanently glued to his or her ear. Behind that is the slightly larger office for the legislator, perhaps with chairs or a couch. The walls seem to be thin metal partitions. The air conditioning throbs annoyingly. The windows are tiny. Yes, there is a pecking order and more senior legislators get digs which are slightly more plush, but you have to look hard to notice the differences.

Amanda consulted her iPhone and decided Sen. McInnis would be our first stop. She's buttonholed legislators a thousand times with an interesting technique. She starts by chatting with legislative assistant, who is a dragon guarding that outer office. Amanda calls them by name, asks about the kids, reminds them of other visits, and explains the "general aviation day" event. Then Amanda lays out a tiny, trivial, insignificant request for just a few minutes of the Senator's time. The Guardian replies of course that's impossible;

they're working on budgets, the legislature is in session, he's very, very important, he's on a Zoom meeting with God.

Then comes The Stare. Having pronounced her Delphic answer, the Guardian glares over our heads at the door behind us, the one through which we should be walking, heads down in humiliation. Perfectly coiffed and completely unflappable, this woman is savvy, rock-hard, and defending her nest. Amanda smiles warmly but is equally implacable. Whoever speaks first loses. Continents would buckle before these two waiver. I whimper in a corner between these stony personalities.



Sen. McInnis is an energetic lawmaker and enthusiastic aviation booster who originally worked as a professional auctioneer which, when you think about it, is great training for a legislator. Today he is the Senate Majority Whip, the Chairman of the Transportation Committee which includes appropriations for airports, and is a member of the Commerce and Education Committee.

Suddenly, Senator McInnis pops out of his office. The ice cracks. He calls me by name and gives us fifteen unscheduled minutes in his office. McInnis is a handsome man of uncertain years, energetic and fit. He stands tall, has a

wonderful smile and a thick, Reaganesque swath of silver hair. His office is cluttered with papers and awards, plus grip-and-grin photos of the Senator with just about everybody but Jimmy Hoffa.

Without prompting, he asks me about the half-dozen major issues facing my airport. He is adamant that the County must start funding the airport (one of my talking points). He added he was working on getting us “some money” but would not make a commitment. A quick glance at his watch tells us our fifteen minutes are finished, and he calls in the gorgon to snap a few photos. Amanda is quietly pleased with the interview. “That’s about as good as they come,” she said. Apparently “promise to try” is standard political fare.

Office Adventures

Nose to her iPhone, Amanda navigates us to another building to find Representative Neal Jackson. Jackson is new to Moore County. He represents District 78 which is a long, skinny swath of countryside which nicks the northern corner of my county. His assistant reports Jackson will be in meetings for



Rep. Neal Jackson is warm and engaging but painfully blunt in his questions and conclusions. The give-and-take in his office was very direct and refreshing; nothing needed to be sugar-coated. On the left is Amanda Honaker, the super-star KTS lobbyist who helped me navigate through the maze of legislative offices.

the next few hours, but we crash into him at the elevators. That’s another win for Amanda, as she recognized him while I did not. She quickly explained our mission and he cordially welcomed us into his office.

Jackson seems younger and more engaging than most of the other legislators. He's a large man brimming with energy. He fills his tiny office with vigor. Unlike other legislative offices, Jackson's perch is organized and neat. His walls are lined with philosophical posters and inspiring quotes, most prominently from Ronald Reagan. Jackson wolfed down his lunch — a single scoop of raspberry sherbet — while we talked.

He cut straight to the point and asked, what do you want? Reflexively, I answered I needed \$5 million for a major terminal upgrade at our airport. He liked my spartan answer and nodded permission to continue. As I hit my other talking points, he seemed thoughtfully impressed. He requested details of the terminal upgrade in writing before close of business in two days, which struck me as very specific and encouraging. Folks don't ask for details if they intend to forget you as soon as the door slams on your butt. I was two for two and it was only the middle of the afternoon.

Amanda raced us to the office of Representative Ben T. Moss, Jr., another legislator new to Moore County. His District 52 includes just a sliver of the southern edge of my county and most of Richmond County, a large cotton and tobacco farming district. When we arrived at Moss' office, he was out. Leaving our cards, Amanda and I schlepped back to the legislative building but my cell pinged. Rep. Moss had returned unexpectedly, his assistant advised me, and was eager to meet us. Confident now in the protocols, I freed Amanda from her babysitting chores as I retraced breadcrumbs back to Moss' lair.

Once again, I was surprised. Representative Moss spent his career in the railroad industry and now owns a retail auto parts store in Richmond County. A fire-plug of a man with a strong grip and a stern manner, he is a powerful personality. We spent thirty minutes together, as I hit my four talking points and answered his questions. His comments were nuanced and thoughtful, more college professor than railroad roughneck. He followed up my answers with more questions, which is a sign a person is really listening. He asked about the

economic impact of airports and compared his local 'drome to the one in Pinehurst for which I was lobbying. All in all, very cordial and promising. Three for three!



Rep. Ben Moss has lived on his family farm for decades, enjoyed a career in the railroad industry and now operates an auto parts store when not serving as a lawmaker in Raleigh. The concept of "citizen legislators" is an old and honorable one, but in North Carolina their pay is so low that Moss drives two hours each way back and forth to the Legislature each day rather than pay big-city prices for a hotel room.

No trip to the legislature is complete without a social hour, and this one did not disappoint. KTS had arranged a posh cocktail hour at a local bistro called "Tobacco Road" and invited the legislators to join us. All of the KTS staff were there, along with the NCAA team, and perhaps fifty airport representatives like

myself. The bar was open, the snacks tasty and the conversation lively. I chatted with the other airport people and found their day had been much like mine. Most had been able to meet their representatives; most found them interested and involved; and most won some sort of general commitment to help. While it's not a perfect system, it's not bad, it's accessible, and it's kind of fun.

Learnings

At this point, dear reader, you probably are thinking while Jonesy's adventures are interesting, but it's not my state, they're not my legislators, and the money won't be coming to my airport. And you would be right, a little bit.

But there are three things I learned from this adventure that are relevant to you and your airport.

The first surprise was the availability of the legislators. Their office doors were open, literally. They were friendly, engaged, and genuinely interested to hear from their constituents. They wanted to learn about new opportunities and new issues. They didn't hide behind platitudes and party-line slogans. To my eyes, they seemed profoundly human and sincerely interested in serving their community.

My next discovery was the complexity of the legislative job. These people work hard. There are endless meetings and piles of documents to digest. Your requests are just one of dozens that cross their desks every month. Plus there are a hundred legislators, each with their own priorities. Then there's the human side of the job. In North Carolina, a state representative is paid \$14,000 a year and nineteen cents a mile for travel expenses. Who's going to spend a hundred nights on the road, away from your family, for such a pittance?

My third conclusion was, and remains, that my lobbying efforts were worth the effort. I spent my career in industrial sales. One of my mantras was, "If you're not talking to your customers, your competitors are." Nobody gets the order on the first visit; trust doesn't grow that quickly. But repeated exposures have an exponential impact. Pretty soon your ideas become theirs; your facts become their selling points; your rough proposals become their detailed legislation. Had I known how approachable these people are, my airport would have been doing this for years.

Not one of my representatives committed to finding millions of dollars for my airport. Does that make my trip a failure? Not at all. They listened, and questioned, and sent follow-up emails. Remember: they're symbiotes, like sharks and remoras, and they need us and our flying friends as much as we need them and their scraps. I plan to meet with them again, and again, and in

the fullness of time my airport will prosper. Neighboring airports, many who did not make this effort, may find it a hungry time.

You can do this, too. Work with your airport's management and your state airport association to develop a brief list of goals and the impediments to those goals. Send your legislators an email about them and ask to visit them. Invite them to tour your airport. They want to hear from you. Our work is not done; it never will be. But now my airport has friends in high places, and your airport should, too.

About the Author

Mike Jones is a 4,000 hour commercial-rated pilot who has more than 50 aircraft types in his logbook. His pride and joy is a Cessna T210, which has carried him to every corner of the U.S. and Canada for more than twenty years. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

