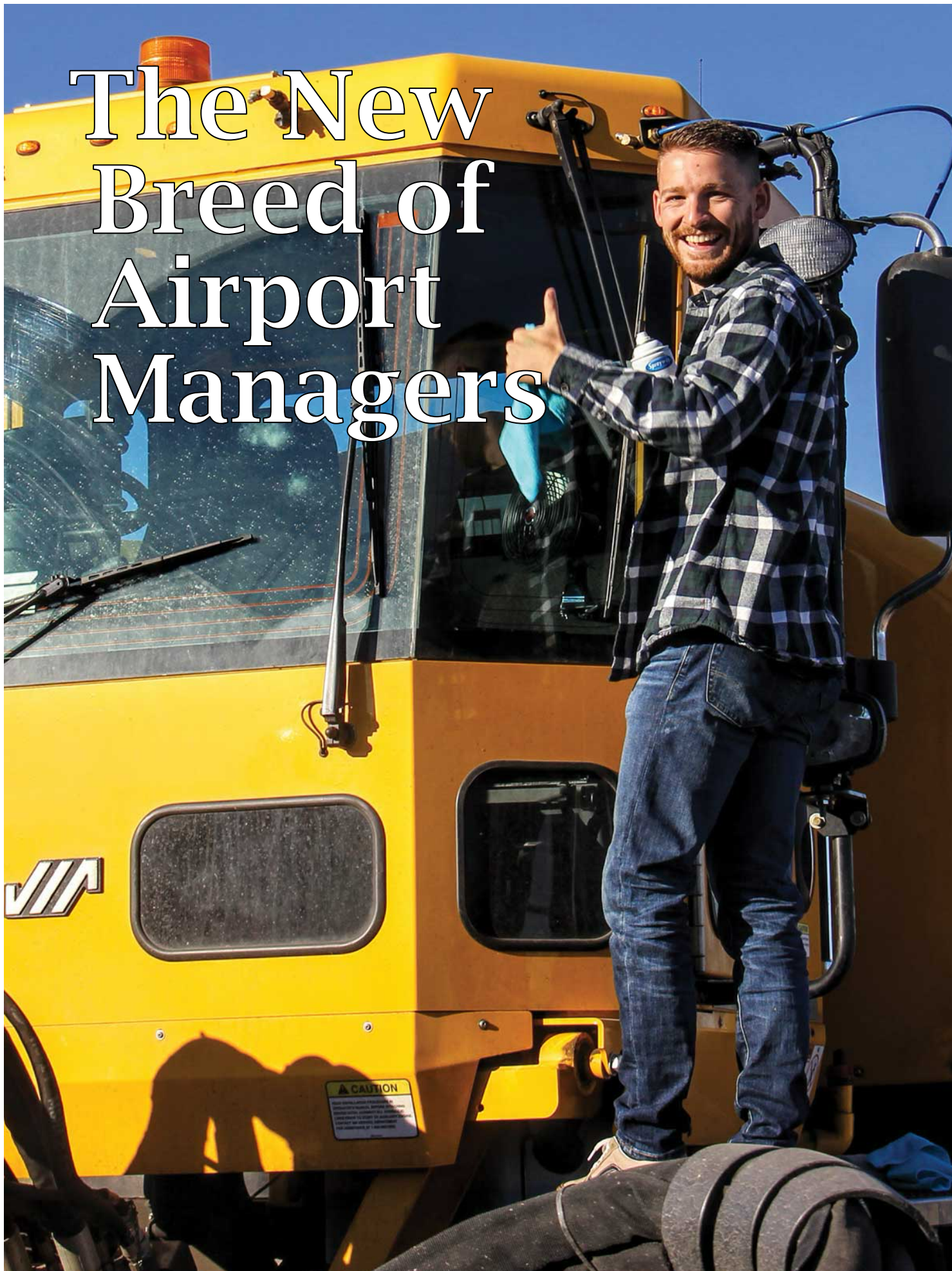


The New Breed of Airport Managers



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By Mike Jones

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A little disclaimer: my day job as an airport consultant is depressing. A real Debby Downer. I'm not calling the suicide hotline (yet) but every day I field calls from pilots who are concerned about their local 'dromes. Their stories feature the same plot: unenthusiastic management, bad business deals, inadequate local support, local governments mis-using airport funds, and (especially in California) city decisions clearly designed to push the airport into closure.

But once in a while I hear a terrific story that gets my heart going again. I hear about smart, engaged people at local airports who are making a difference, changing the lift vector in a positive direction. Here are three exciting examples — none of whom have been on the job more than six months — of a new breed of airport managers who are kicking it up a notch.

Mountain Girl

Lorraine Martinelli grew up in California near Yosemite, with deep forests and huge mountains but, for reasons even she cannot explain, the hard blue skies were her main attraction. Even as a little girl, "I was always distracted by anything that flew over me," she recalls. Maybe it was in her genes: even though she never met her grandfather, he was a pilot and, back when border crossings were simpler, regularly flew a Piper Cub into Mexico to woo the woman who

became his wife and Martinelli's grandmother. But life got in the way of Martinelli's flying, as it so often does, and before ever stepping into the world of aviation she acquired a degree in accounting, a husband who repairs warbirds, and a passel of kids.

Sustaining her business career was difficult because her husband kept



Lorraine Martinelli is a superb role-model for many aspiring aviators because she is a pilot and an airport manager. She like to showcase the numerous career opportunities in aviation which now are open to all kids.

uprooting the household as better opportunities arose. Most recently, they were living in Hawaii “and loving it” when the Erickson Aircraft Collection of Oregon asked him to come and help keep their antiques air-worthy. “He got the call, and we were on our way to Madras,” she recalls with a sigh.

The kids actually were her aviation trigger. She was a parent-escort on a school trip to an airport with a gaggle of youngsters when the flying bug bit hard. She asked an instructor “What does it take?” to which the instructor said, “Time, money, and will.” She explained that with two kids, she had a distinct shortage of the first two items. He dismissed her, claiming “You are never going to get your license.” To which she replied, “Watch me.”

Once she finished her ground school and soloed, “I’d race to the field every morning before sunrise,” she remembers. “I’d take off and practice pattern work. Then I’d race back home and get the kids off to school.” It took her a year to get her ticket, but now she’s added 600 hours and an instrument rating to her logbook, along with complex, high-performance, and taildragger approvals.

“I’m constantly learning, and constantly promoting aviation, both as much as I can,” she told me.

Martinelli has lived in Madras for nine years. It is a town of 8,000 people in the high plains of central Oregon; remote, almost barren but quite spectacular in its own way, Martinelli advised me enthusiastically. The airport, S33, has two runways and is home to a variety of flying endeavors: the afore-mentioned warbirds, certainly, but also crop dusters, skydivers, fire-fighting tankers, and an active G.A. community. There are four large corporate hangars but only nine tee hangars.

Initially her involvement with the airport was purely as a volunteer. She helped out with the FBO (who wouldn’t want free accounting expertise?) and was a leader for the local chapter of the Ninety-Nines. Sensing a disconnect between the pilots on the field, she organized an informal group called

“Madras Aviator Chats” where pilots from the different organizations could meet and share what they flew, how they flew them, what they needed from the airport and each other.

A rural airport like Madras is hardly going to be a promising career move for an aspiring airport executive, and the airport went through four managers in twelve months. The most recent airport manager called Martinelli during his first day on the job and asked if she’d be his part-time assistant. She agreed, joined the payroll, and the very next day he quit and left her holding the aeronautical bag. She was formally appointed to the role in January 2024.

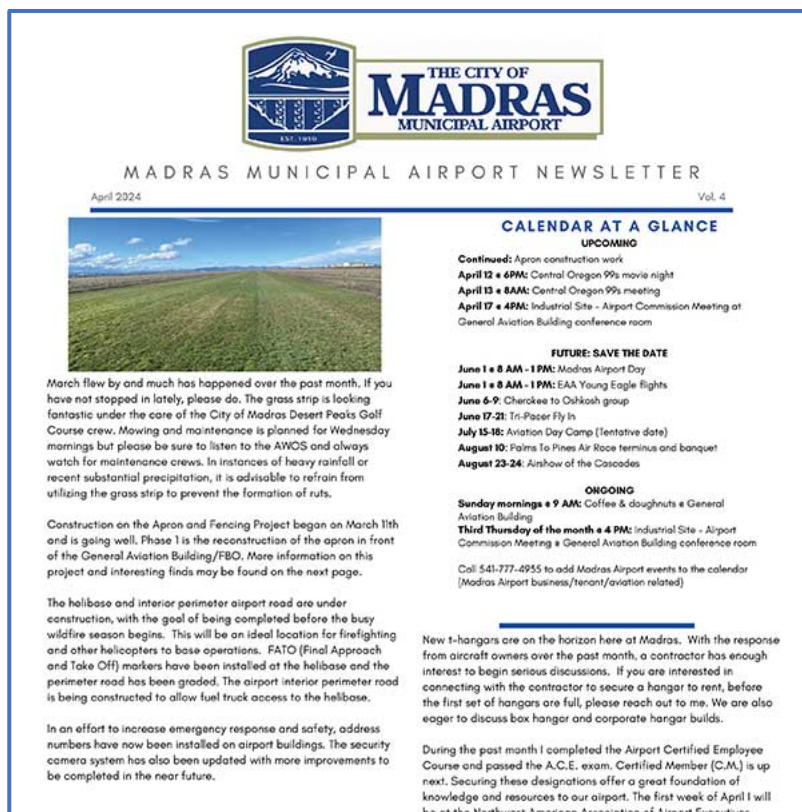


Martinelli has unusual access to a marvelous collection of warbirds which are based at her field. Here, she and a youngster check out the intimidating cockpit of a warbird from the Erikson collection.

With only five months on the job, her plans are aggressive. She's very enthusiastic about economic development. She has tagged hundreds of acres of land on the airport and adjacent to it as potential sites for aviation-related businesses. In mid-summer the airport's apron will enjoy a complete reconstruction, and immediately thereafter will host the first Madras Airport Day, with static displays, food trucks and entertainment. FEMA came

to the airport and developed a plan to use the airport as the center of a regional emergency response plan, supporting the recovery from events such as a massive forest fire or the long-overdue "Cascadia earthquake." She's already planning the 2024 edition of the "Airshow of the Cascades" for August which will attract 15,000 people to her community. She's even helped fifteen young Scouts get their aviation merit badges.

Her vision is to find ways for the airport help the community even more. In mid-summer the FBO will revert back to the airport's control, along with the fuel sales, which will help stabilize the airport's budget. She's already started an e-newsletter which is sent to all the base customers, keeping the community updated on plans and progress. "My heart is to be an advocate for the airport and aviation," she concluded.



One of Martinelli's newest innovations at Madras has been the deployment of a quarterly newsletter. While it's time-consuming, this effort helps keep the entire community aware of construction plans, local events and regional fly-in opportunities, all of which builds trust and enthusiasm across the aviation community.

“Airports are not just for the rich 1% and their flying toys,” she coached me. “We benefit 100% of the people in our region, everyone. We enable emergency medical service and firefighting services. Oregon’s farms feed the nation, and our airport hosts many of the crop dusters that make those farms so productive. People fly into our airport for the hunting, fishing and white-water rafting, which fills up our hotels and restaurants. This airport is an important part of the whole community’s economy, and we’re going to do even more.”

Sheep Parade

Scoot about 1,000 miles south from Madras and you’ll find a sophisticated stop in Cedar City, Utah. Snuggled into the southwest corner of the Beehive State, Cedar City may sound like a dusty cow-town on the Oregon Trail. That would be wrong: it is better known as America’s “Festival City” due to the plethora of events and attractions the city hosts. These include music festivals, parades, touring bike races, rodeos, some of the country’s finest National Parks, a Shakespeare festival, and even a sheep parade in the last week of October.

The aeronautical host for all this activity is Cedar City Regional (KCDC), a modest facility with two runways, 117 based aircraft, a massive flight school with 500 students operated by Southern Utah University, and a sliver of commercial service back and forth 250 miles to Salt Lake City. The new manager is the effervescent Tyler Galetka who is determined to make his ‘drome the aeronautical epicenter of the western USA.

Galetka has always been fascinated by airplanes. As a boy, he “used to sit on the fence and watch the old piston-powered fire-fighting planes taking-off, low and slow.” While he was “trying to figure out what to do for a career” he started pumping fuel at the airport’s family-owned FBO and found it exciting. Quickly he was promoted to a supervisory role and began training staff, working on compliance issues, and equipment maintenance.

Three years later, a slot opened up on the airport staff. He won the title “Head of Operations” but the only person he supervised was himself. The job fit his style and his enthusiasm. “I did all the airport Part 139 compliance inspections, including the runway, the lighting, and the safety areas, keeping everything safe.” He had a “fantastic” mentor in the airport manager — they had both started at the airport on the exact same day — so the overall environment was “a great experience.”



According to Galetka, one of the most entertaining aspects of the airport management job is getting to inspect all of the different and very exciting machinery which is used to keep a commercial airport humming. Sometimes, even the family can join in the fun.

Galetka served four years and developed a strong understanding of the airport inside and out. At the close of this period, he branched out in two new directions simultaneously. He went back to school — a four-year degree from Utah Valley University in aviation management — and started a family.

Topping off this excitement, the same week he graduated he was promoted to Airport Manager, at the wizened age of 27.

“You see, a small airport is a different beast than a hub airport like Salt Lake City. Airports are much more than just a place where rich people park their planes. We meet with the Cedar City economic development people to find new businesses to be on the field,” he explained. Plus he is the public face of that airport.

“The work never stops. I get phone calls and emails all day and all night; there’s no place to hide.” Today he supervises three full-time staff and three part-timers, and manages a budget just shy of a million dollars a year.

As hard as Galteka works at the office, he works just as diligently as a father and a husband. One of the biggest challenges “is to make time for the family. I had to learn to put my phone away, to turn off the email. Setting priorities is crucial, and my family is just as important as the airport, maybe more.”



Tyler Galetka and his family in front of the commercial fire fighting equipment.

He also has time to imagine what his airport might become. “We have a lot of dreams for Cedar City,” he said quietly but confidently. “We want to use the airport to help energize the community, maybe with an airshow, or fly ins, and certainly expanding our commercial service to more destinations.”

“I’ve been handed this fantastic airport, and I want to make it better. We have lots of space to grow inside the fence, to develop the entire other side of the airport with corporate aviation, G.A. hangars, and the maintenance and support for those customers. That would add a lot of jobs.”

One specific aspiration is to establish an air traffic control tower. “Getting a tower is our #1 goal,” he explained. “With the University flight school, we average 100,000 operations a year. We’re in the top 25% of all the G.A. airports in America, as measured by traffic, and we’re one of the busiest without a

tower.” Galetka knows of pilots who fly past Cedar City and refuel elsewhere, simply because the pattern is jammed with novice pilots.

His long-term vision? Electric helicopters and the new technologies of advanced air mobility (AAM), which he thinks will transform travel in the sparsely-populated spaces of Utah. This technology is real: the FAA plans to certify the first eVTOL aircraft in 2025 and initiate passenger services in 2028. Galetka is getting a jump-start and spearheading a Master Plan update that includes a vertiport, even though the FAA hasn’t defined the parameters for vertiports and none of the aircraft are certified. Yet.

Topgun Turns to Cessna

Heron Weidner is the new airport manager at Williamsburg-Jamestown Airport (KJGG) in the tidewater region of Virginia. Her airport is interesting with 60 based aircraft and one narrow runway just 3,500 feet long. The airport is land-locked, surrounded by newly-built homes, the James River, and protected wetlands. Williamsburg also is privately-owned, which means improvements are funded by the octogenarian owner Larry Waltrip, not the public purse.



Although her traditional steed was the mighty F-15E Strike Eagle, which can carry more armament than a World War II bomber, Weidner is quickly adjusting to the new life as a general aviation pilot. She’s a partner in this Cessna 172 and flies whenever her new airport duties permit.

Weidner is interesting as well. She was raised in Dallas and, as a teen, wanted to have nothing to do with aviation. “I was babysitting a neighborhood kid, and that little snot made me watch ‘Topgun’ a thousand times!” she laughs.

But that boy's father was Capt. Brad Smith, who flew for the Marines and American Airlines. "The second I touched his F-18, with his name on the side, it was amazing, it was intimidating, impressive and awesome," she remembers. "That's the moment the seed took hold."

Her next stop? Capt. Smith helped her snag a line job at a local airport. She must have been a sight: a skinny 17-year old driving a 2,000 gallon stick-shift fuel truck and hot-fueling the local news helicopter. She quickly grokked the life of an aviator and made a life-changing decision: it would be fighter jets, always.

A bachelors' degree in aviation from Western Michigan University followed, which came with all the usual private, commercial, and instrument endorsements. From there she jumped into the deep end of life: flying F-15s for the Air Force, plus a masters' degree in International Affairs, a second masters' in Business Administration, and a husband who flies an F-22. Just kind of ho-hum, don't you think?



Heron Weidner is proud of the contribution general aviation is making to the Tidewater area of southern Virginia. In addition to corporate aviation, she has the airport sponsoring bookmobile weeks, pancake breakfasts, and scholarships for aspiring teenage aviators. Here she speaks to a group of engaged seniors who were very interested in the airport and it's future.

Fast-forward, twenty years. "The day my helmet and G-suit went into the closet, I knew I had to get back to G.A. flying," she said with a smile. Since her husband had been transferred to near-by Langley they deliberately moved to near the Williamsburg airport. "I just started loitering around it, offering to help Larry where I could. I painted the bathrooms. There was an old city bus on the ramp, all rusty and flat tires. I sold that, and got [the airport] some money."

When the airport's long-time bookkeeper, Debby Shaw, was ready to retire Weidner stepped in. "That was my first official role, and I still do the bookkeeping. But it rapidly morphed into everything an airport needs from a manager."

"Larry's team is amazing. These guys wrote the book on running small airports." She cites the multigenerational pedigrees of her teammates.

"Larry owns the airport, and he's an engineer and an entrepreneur, and he's 82. Bill Osborne has been here almost a decade and he's about to turn 80. Charley Rogers has been here for two decades, he's in his mid-70s. Bill Gough is 81, and he just told me he's retiring after 21 years as a lineman. These guys are national treasures."

"But I've been asking Larry, where do you want to go with this?" Their shopping list has burgeoned. They have just finished eighteen new hangars and they're planning more. The AWOS has been out-of-service for a year but will be back on-line soon. A PAPI would be a huge improvement, as would be an RNAV instrument approach with lower minimums. She'd like to introduce sustainable aviation fuel at the field, and mogas for ROTAX engines.

"But these are all big strategic investments and Williamsburg doesn't have federal funding. That's a tough challenge, balancing the effort, the dollars, and the priorities. But it's really fun and it gets me excited."

So how does Weidner plan to build public support? By making the airport more open, inviting, accessible and useful.

"If you want astronauts, you have to start at age two. Why doesn't every airport have a playground?" she asked rhetorically. "We're not only going to expand ours, we're going to give it an aviation theme with a little control tower."



For her presentation with the seniors, Weidner had her Cessna pulled on to the ramp and opened it up for inspection. While each individual meeting or conversation won't change the world, she's confident that over time this positive and engaged approach to the community will enable her airport to prosper and thrive.

She's also recruited Aden Alexander, age 18, to be the airport's groundskeeper. She created a "STEM Fest library week" built around the local library's bookmobile. She's tasked Natalie Tidd, a marketing student at the College of William & Mary, to create social

media for the airport and is getting real-world marketing experience to put on her resumé. She cites the eleven organizations located on the field — three businesses including an award-winning airport restaurant, plus the EAA chapter, a Ninety-Nine chapter, a dog rescue flight operation, and more — all of whom reach into different corners of the community.

A great example of her outreach is a luncheon she hosted for the residents of an assisted living facility which abuts the airport and adjacent to the AWOS. About 45 seniors attended, listened to a brief presentation, and asked pointed questions while munching on sandwiches from Charley's Airport Restaurant. Those people may walk with a cane but their brains were sharp. They pushed her (politely) on issues relating to airport operations, noise, tree removal, and safety. Each one of those visitors will, no doubt, report to their kids and grandkids about the wonderful day they enjoyed at the airport, which is exactly the point of community outreach.

“Aviation needs to get closer to the people who need it and use it,” she announces. “Airports need to be as essential to modern life as the grocery store, the post office and the hospital. They should be a part of everybody’s life.”

Now Playing at Your Airport

It would be easy to dismiss these three individuals as exceptions to the rule. One might argue not everybody or every airport can be so skilled, so motivated, or so lucky. That would be wrong.

It is undisputed that there are hundreds of sub-par airports across our country languishing in the indolence and the summer sun. Their potential is wasted; their energy smothered, their contribution to the community dissipated. Because no one is speaking up for the airports, hungry builders sniff around the fences, eager to put hundreds of homes on those flat acres and millions of dollars into their pockets (I’m talking to you, Watsonville and Torrance!). But it doesn’t need to have an unhappy ending.

These three people prove my point: collectively, we all can do more and do better. Leadership makes a difference. Vision makes a difference. Determination and diligence make a difference. We need our airports to be more than just clubs for weekend flyers. We need to convert our love for aviation into an engine of economic opportunity for everyone in our communities. Only then will our airports be safe from inept politicians and rapacious developers. Only then will the magic of flight be appreciated by all.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is a 4,000-hour general aviation pilot, an entrepreneur, and an expert in airport governance. He has served on his local airport authority for the better part of a decade, and has now embarked on his fourth career helping to save endangered airports. He's working with small G.A. airports across the country, helping them to get grants, protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He's always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

