

The Uncertain Future of the Lock Haven Airport



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By Mike Jones

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There's no doubt that the Sentimental Journey Fly-in is a wonderful party, but this writer — who has significant expertise in these matters — has grave doubts about its survival. Two converging forces are squeezing it into the history books. One force originates with the City of Lock Haven, and the other lies with the management of the event itself.

Inside City Hall, somebody is trying to sink the airport. The City has reduced the staff and services, blocked some customers from accessing the field with chain link fencing, sequestered thirteen acres of land as an unwieldy “enterprise zone”, failed to price services competitively, neglected to solicit grants, imposed onerous “overhead” charges, and avoided funding urgently-needed capital improvements. Whew.

The City Manager has opined that the airport is a drag on the city's already perilous finances. He misleadingly informed interest citizens when he wrote, “The airport has had a loss every year for 36 years, except for four years.” That may be true, but part of that outcome is due to his sabotage.

Here's just one example of the City's budgetary sabotage: last year, the airport was charged \$16,000 for information technology (I.T.) services. For an



The Lock Haven Airport, during the 2024 “Sentimental Journey Fly-in. Notice the 13-acre area on the left side of the field fenced-off as an economic development zone. The lack of aircraft parking has hamstrung the Fly-in and degraded its ability to grow.

airport with one employee and one computer? No wonder the airport is losing money: it’s being mis-managed from the top.

It is difficult to judge if the City’s policies are based upon the City’s own financial pressures, deliberate sabotage, or chronic ineptitude. To this observer it seems the City does not understand the airport’s technical, financial, or aeronautical needs, nor do they value the contribution it makes to the community.

Back at the offices of Sentimental Journey, the organization seems ossified. Cal Arter has been president for decades. The other top managers are equally

long in the tooth and, while charming individually and undoubtedly dedicated, they seem dangerously out of touch with modern event management.

For example, the event has only two paid staff and three year-round volunteers, which means the breadth and diversity of the marketing and management skills available to the program are limited. His “sponsors” are fine neighbors but with no marketing punch: the Wayne Township Land Fill?

The event spends a small fortune on a glossy souvenir brochure, but print media is an expensive dinosaur. Plus, it only reaches those people who already are walking through the gates. A better investment would be a mobile app for the event.

Arter refuses to spend money on digital advertising, web sites, or celebrity influencers. “Don’t ask me anything about social media, I don’t know anything about computers,” he said. “It’s all spam anyways.” His primary innovation for 2025 is to roll the dice with his entire marketing budget on a booth at Sun-n-Fun. “That will eat up our advertising.”

One bright spot on the horizon is the arrival of some new executives, starting with Mark Stewart. Stewart is a retired G.E. executive who brings strong managerial skills to the program; he will take over from Arter as president in a few months. More than two decades younger than Arter, he’s particularly worried about the aging pilot population and the migration of young people to today’s digital hobbies. Stewart envisions re-positioning the fly-in from a purely-Piper event to a more general focus on rag-and-tube



Cal Arter, founder of the Sentimental Journey fly-in.

taildraggers of all types, which certainly would expand the target market. He already has engaged with several type-clubs and has received a warm welcome. Unanswered is the big question: will such tweaks be enough?

Sentimental Journey is a charming anachronism, but the hard facts are in the numbers. Attendance has fallen from 600 planes in the 1990s to about 100 planes this year, the number and variety of vendors has dropped precipitously, and ticket sales to local visitors have dwindled. If Sentimental Journey is “to go on forever” something has got to change.

About the Author

Dr. Mike Jones is an entrepreneur who uses his business expertise to help G.A. airports across the country improve their governance and operations, speeding them on their way to more revenues, grants, and community support. He also helps protect them from avaricious developers and reverse the damage caused by ineffectual politicians. He’s been writing for this magazine for nearly a decade, flown 800 Young Eagle missions, and put 4,000 hours in his logbook. He’s always accessible at PilotMike2012@gmail.com.

