

Aurora State Airport: Finding Its Economic Footing

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By Josh Kulla



This DC-3 was restored by Aerometal International, a company dedicated to rebuilding vintage aircraft to FAA standards.

Quietly, underneath the radar, so to speak, the Aurora State Airport has been busy expanding its economic influence in Canby, Wilsonville and the surrounding area.



All types of aircraft and work are being done at the Aurora State Airport as the facility undergoes important changes.

It's a far cry from several years ago, when public skepticism over proposed future plans for the airport were at their height. Now, state officials say, the construction of a new air traffic control tower is on track to start before the end of the year, and businesses are thriving in a way not seen since before the recent recession.

"There are in the vicinity of 1,000 people working here, and they're all making good money, most of them," said James Hand, a local real estate broker and private pilot. "The multiplier effect of those dollars in a community can be four or five times what the transaction was on its face. Then that goes out and buys apartments, houses, food, automobiles, everything."

Hand helped host a recent tour of the Aurora Airport for the Wilsonville Chamber of Commerce. The latter group has been at the forefront of efforts to smooth the way for continued business growth at the airport.

They've done this not only through recruitment, but continued public outreach that has helped quell the louder voices that once expressed trepidation at the prospects of increased air traffic at Oregon's fifth-busiest airport.

"I think the leadership change in the chamber of commerce has helped to educate the Wilsonville community," said Oregon Aviation Department Director Mitch Swecker. "The communication has always been there in my mind. PAAM (Positive Aurora Airport Management) and Charbonneau have been involved in everything the whole time I've been here."

Nonetheless, Swecker said, the past resistance to airport expansion and the public involvement it generated actually has had a productive outcome. In the case of jets taking off, he added, the Federal Aviation Administration even adopted new rules requiring pilots to turn to the east or west after liftoff to avoid overflying several local towns.

"Now it's all education," Swecker said. "You can't swing a dead cat out here without hitting a noise abatement sign. There's a lot of noise abatement signs and a lot of it is that transient aircraft have to follow it because we actually got the FAA to change their departure procedures."

Around the airport, the evidence of economic growth is clear. It ranges from a 15,000-square-foot expansion of the Columbia Helicopter facility at the north end of the airport to a \$25 million facility at the south end recently built by Canadian firm Helicopter Transport Services.

Other companies that are experiencing strong business include kit plane manufacturer Van's, as well as Wilson Electric and Aerometal International, which restores vintage aircraft such as the Douglas DC-3 and other famous models.

Aside from physical expansion, said Aurora Aviation owner Bruce Bennett, there also is an increasing demand for flight instruction, fuel sales and aircraft maintenance.

"There's not any one thing," said Bennett. "HTS is a great addition with 100 employee — it's Corvallis' loss — but it's no one big thing, but a lot of things across the board. It's better that way, there's no bubble."

Bennett also credited effective public communication for quieting down the opposition to airport expansion.

Meanwhile, construction of a control tower funded by a Connect Oregon grant now looks imminent — the project was going out to bid last week, according to Swecker.

“This is one of the busiest airports in the state and there is a substantial safety issue here with an uncontrolled environment with the number of aircraft operating here,” Swecker said. “So the aircraft control tower is a safety feature that’s going to benefit all the tenants here and the corporate aircraft.”

Runway expansion also remains on the table as part of an airport layout plan adopted last October by the FAA and ODA.

Even more than the control tower, runway expansion has been at the forefront of public questions about the intentions of the ODA and the aviation community.

Local advocacy group Friends of French Prairie has been among the most active in this regard, and the group still questions the lack of public input that went into the 2012 plan.

It calls for a 1,000-foot runway expansion to the south end of the airport, the acquisition of 55 acres of farmland to the south of the runway to extend the safety threshold and the abandonment of the west end of Kiel Road where it intersects with Highway 551.

A recent blog post at friendsoffrenchprairie.org states this is a “delivered plan” that is as far from the original preferred alternative as it is possible to get. The group continues to question the ODA’s insistence on spending public money to benefit a small group of individuals and businesses.

“What has ensued — is an egregious overturn of public process, where all public input ended up ignored and used as nothing more than window dressing so state and federal aviation agencies could get what they wanted all along,” the blog post states. “And who benefits? A very small percentage, the less than 1 percent in the aviation sector, who now get to have their infrastructure paid for by regular taxpayers.”

Naturally, this sort of analysis is dismissed by expansion proponents.

“It was misinformation,” Bennett said. “It’s the truth; people thought that development would mean noise and it’s not, it’s development, period. The noise is caused by the older, louder airplanes, which are going away. The flight patterns have changed over populated areas, and the tower will make a significant improvement there. Right now it’s recommended, so it’ll be like having a stop light versus a yield sign — one is kind of absolute.”