



# AIR TAP Briefings

A publication of the Airport Technical Assistance Program of the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota

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Editor's note: This issue of the AirTAP *Briefings* features several sessions from the 2016 Minnesota Airports Conference, held April 20–22 in Brainerd. Presentations for many sessions are also available at [airtap.umn.edu/events/airportsconference/2016](http://airtap.umn.edu/events/airportsconference/2016).

## Is your airport 'Minnesota Nice?'

For many visitors, the airport is the first point of contact with a community: Is it presenting a welcoming and pleasant experience for visitors? This session featured three local airport managers sharing how they make their airport inviting and an overview on Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) efforts to gather information about amenities and services important to airport users.

Rachel Obermoller with MnDOT's Office of Aeronautics began by sharing findings from a recent survey of local pilots to identify what factors they consider when planning a trip (see box, pg. 2).

MnDOT found that pilots use a variety of resources to learn about airports, including the FAA's *Chart Supplements* (formerly *Airport/Facility Directory*), the *Minnesota Airport Directory and Travel Guide*, tablet or smartphone apps such as ForeFlight and FltPlan Go, and websites such as AirNav.com or FltPlan.com as well as an airport's website. Thus, it's important that those sources are kept up to date, Obermoller noted.

Because having a courtesy car presents a

liability issue for an airport, MnDOT asked pilots in the survey if they'd be open to bike transportation. Up to 75 percent of respondents indicated they would ride a courtesy bike, and almost two-thirds would ride a bike up to three miles one way. Looking into courtesy bikes might be a great way to provide pilots with a way to get to town, according to the survey.

Obermoller concluded by saying that everyday maintenance and keeping the pavement surfaces and approach in good condition are the most important factors for pilots considering whether to use an airport.

The airport panel began with Steve Birkland from the Milaca Municipal Airport, who said that what makes the Milaca airport special is the pride it takes in what it does. Milaca is a small town with limited funding for the airport. Despite this, the airport has grown and created amenities and services in small increments. Another way the airport ensures it remains an appealing destination is by requiring hangar owners to keep their areas and buildings maintained.

A significant change occurred when a skydiving business moved in, which brought



a lot of local spectators out to the airport. An increase in the number of visitors was a challenge, but the airport has made it work, Birkland said. Attention to detail, cleanliness (of bathrooms and the pilot's lounge), and Wi-Fi are all important, he continued. The airport partnered with an area Boy Scout troop to build a patio with grills and picnic tables, and it provides aircraft parking for a fly-in breakfast as well as under-the-wing camping on site. The airport also added an airplane wash station. Perhaps its most interesting event, Birkland said, was a fly-in held the weekend after the EAA Fly-in in Oshkosh that included a cookout, competitions, live bands, and flower drops.

Joe LaRue from Elbow Lake Municipal Airport said his airport focuses on quality and value and tries to exceed expecta-

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## An airport's story: Winona Municipal Airport

Winona Municipal Airport—Max Conrad Field is a general aviation airport located in the bluff country of southeastern Minnesota along the Mississippi River, about three miles northwest of the central business district of Winona.

The airport has two runways: Runway 12/30 and Runway 17/35. The City of Winona, which runs the airport, owns three T-hangars that provide a total of 20 hangar spaces. Construction of the airport took place between 1949 and 1951, with operations beginning in December of 1951. In the 1950s, the airport was named in honor of record-setting aviator Maximilian "Max" Conrad, born in Winona in 1903.

Keith Nelson with the City of Winona serves as the airport's director and George Bolon runs the airport's full-service fixed-base operator (FBO), WinAir. The FBO has been operating since 1997 and offers aircraft management, fuel, maintenance, charter service, aircraft leasing, flight instruction, and aircraft rentals.

According to Bolon, what is most valuable about the airport is its economic impact on the community. The airport was once served by one passenger airliner, North Central Airlines, until the mid-1970s. Today, local general aviation accounts for most operations. The city is home to such companies as Fastenal, RTP, Benchmark Electronics, and Watkins, all of which use the airport regularly. Winona's

two universities and one community college generate airport traffic as well. Winona is also a destination for arts and recreation. The city hosts well-known bluegrass music and Shakespeare festivals and is home to a marine art museum.

Bolon has noticed a general trend at the Winona airport in which corporate aviation has remained stable or grown, while recreational aviation (except for light sport) has been stable or shrinking. The Winona airport is also selling less aviation gas but more aviation jet fuel.

The airport has nearly completed a major 18-month, \$12 million renovation. The project extended the airport runways, put down new asphalt, added new lights and signage, and installed a new navigational system. Work was almost completely funded by federal aviation fuel tax dollars, with additional money from the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the City of Winona. Although the project extended the airstrip to 5,670 feet, which allows heavier planes and more traffic, the primary goal was safety, Bolon says. The new navigational system allows pilots to land with less visibility and lower ceilings than before.

At the 2016 Minnesota Airports Conference, Winona Municipal Airport received the Project of the Year award in the Key Airport category for the project. Bolon says the process used



The Winona airport received a Project of the Year award at the 2016 Minnesota Airports Conference. From left: Joe Harris, George Bolon, Michelle Baird, Keith Nelson, Bill Holland, and Tom Werner.

to rebuild the main runway was unique. The existing asphalt surface was recycled into the base course. Upon removal, it was pulverized and then mixed with fresh bituminous mixture containing 2 percent asphalt oil to create an 8-inch stabilized base. That base course was then overlaid with new asphalt pavement.

"To the best of my knowledge, this [method] has not been used in Minnesota or for a federally funded project," he says, adding that he expects this method will increase the service life of the runway from 20 to 30 years.

The project also won a 2015 Asphalt Merit Award from the Minnesota Asphalt Pavement Association.

# Long-time MAC leader looks back



Jeff Hamiel

Once again, a highlight of the conference was Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) executive director Jeff Hamiel's annual update on the state of aviation in Minnesota. This year's was especially poignant, as Hamiel reflected on his 39-year career at the MAC. [Hamiel retired at the end of May.] He shared some stories and lessons learned from his tenure.

Hamiel noted that the single most significant event relating to aviation of the last 40 years was the Deregulation Act of 1978. He also talked about the search for a new airport site that occurred in the 1980s and 90s, and

how the events of September 11 impacted him, MAC's operations, and our country's approach to aviation security. He recalled how Northwest Airline's bankruptcy affected the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, contrasting that with how the airport is currently moving forward with a significant expansion to make room for a hotel, more parking, and reconfigured entrance and exit roads. Hamiel also shared his enthusiasm for Brian Ryks to start work as the new MAC executive director this spring and encouraged the aviation community to welcome him back to Minnesota [from Michigan, where he was executive director of the Gerald R. Ford International Airport in Grand Rapids.]

Hamiel offered some advice, too. "If you are in a leadership position, the most impor-

tant thing is to take care of your people. Hire the best you can get and get out of their way," he said. They want to do the best job; don't over-supervise. "If you're a manager, give your people opportunities to make decisions. If they're good, congratulate them. If they fail, tell them to learn [from it] and move on," he said.

And sometimes you have to let people go. He said he tells his staff, "If you like your job and like working here, continue to do it well...if you don't like it, please find another job...Life is too short."

Finally, he emphasized the importance of integrity and urged people to always do what they think is right. "It's common sense," he said. "If you say you're going to do something, do it. If you don't follow through, admit it and make it square."

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tions for service at a small airport. Staff works hard, which costs money, he said. Airport staff greet landers, help fuelers, and engage visitors in conversation. While the focus on details, and cleanliness, is important, LaRue said the most critical factor in success is building relationships and involving the community. Engaging groups that don't normally visit the airport has generated a lot of support, he continued; efforts have included providing tours for 4-H and other groups, participating with school events, mentoring students, hosting Aviation Day events and Young Eagle's flights, and partnering with other area airports to do things they couldn't otherwise do. The airport also sponsors community events, such as a family fun day and expo with demonstrations on how to control and build airplanes.

In addition, the airport publishes its own newsletter highlighting new license recipients and people who are active at the airport. Staff also post frequently on social media, update websites on a specific

## Pilot considerations when planning a flight:

- Courtesy car (80%)
- Fuel (75%) and self-service fuel (50%)
- Clean restroom facilities (67.5%)
- Updated fuel prices online (62.5%)
- Clean and updated A/D building (57.5%)
- Nearest airport to my destination (50%)
- Runway lighting (50%)
- Instrument approach available (45%)

day each week, and take lots of photos, he added.

LaRue acknowledged that all of this work—building relationships with the community, finding other airport champions, finding flight instructors to stay on at the airport, and maintaining courtesy cars and equipment—is a challenge that takes a great deal of energy.

Chris Fredrick, Buffalo Municipal Airport, said his airport strives to create a comfortable environment for visitors, such as by maintaining a pilot's lounge with a kitchenette. He believes the airport needs

to work closely with the community, the tourism department, and the chamber of commerce. The airport has joined local community service organizations such as the Rotary and the Lions and also engages with the local newspaper and social media to get coverage of the airport.

The Buffalo airport is especially active in hosting events, community meetings, fly-ins, and school field trips, Fredrick said. Its A/D building is 1600 square feet with a seating capacity of 50; community groups and nonprofits can use it free of charge (businesses pay a nominal fee). The airport has an aerobatic pilot on site who performs a 30-minute air show every other year; the event is hosted by the local EAA chapter and draws about 900 guests. Another successful event was the Boy Scout aviation "camporee"—a two-and-a-half day event featuring flights, badge work, college presentations, and military displays. "The best part is that the Boy Scouts did all the work," Fredrick said; hangar owners were also gracious and opened their doors for the 600 scouts in attendance.

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