Coronavirus creates changes, slowdowns for state’s airports

On a typical day, the two runways at Mankato Regional Airport are busy as aviation students at the state’s only accredited four-year flight school, Minnesota State University, Mankato, conduct numerous takeoffs and landings. However, things changed quickly in mid-March as Minnesota responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a statewide stay-at-home order.

“Even though our airport was designated as an essential service, our main traffic is the flight school, so once that was shut down our traffic was down 80 to 95 percent,” says Kevin Baker, Mankato Regional Airport manager. “Very recently the flight school resumed some flights, so we’re starting to see a gradual pickup in activity.”

Air traffic’s sudden halt

All across the state, airports found themselves in similar situations, with drastic reductions in flight activity sometimes necessitating decreases in staffing.

“We had operations decrease significantly during the stay-at-home order,” says Eric Rudningen, manager of Willmar Municipal Airport. “Our fuel sales so far this year are running about 40 percent of what they were in 2019, and operations are running about 25 percent of what they normally are at this time of year. As a result of the slowdown, we shut down our maintenance shop from March 27 through May 11 and furloughed our front-office staff member until traffic picks up.”

Airports across the nation are experiencing similar hardships, leading to growing concern among industry groups. In a joint letter to Congress, the National Association of State Aviation Officials (NASAO) and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) explained the scope of the challenge.

“The precipitous drop in aviation activity of all kinds is leading to a corresponding drop in revenues for all types of airports, both commercial and general aviation,” they wrote. “These revenue losses will make it more difficult for airports to afford their debt payments and continue to meet their operational needs in keeping the airways open for vital commerce and transportation of goods, services and people.”

At Thief River Falls Regional Airport—which ships more than a million packages each year—the one bright spot amid the shutdown was cargo traffic.

“Our numbers plummeted since the shelter-in-place order was announced, and even before that businesses had made the decision not to travel for non-essential reasons. I estimate our traffic has dropped 91 percent from our average 2019 levels,” says Joe Hedrick, Thief River Falls Regional Airport manager. “The good news is that our cargo numbers haven’t changed much since the beginning of the pandemic. We have seen only a modest reduction in cargo volumes but with the same number of aircraft flying the routes.”

A cautious restart

As the nation’s economy slowly resumes, Minnesota’s airport managers are preparing to do business in a post-COVID world. For many, this means an increase in cleaning and sanitation and reimagining how employees can work together yet stay apart.

“As we have returned to work, we have implemented the Minnesota Department of Health and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines for social distancing,” says Rudningen. “For example, we have our mechanics working on separate projects and we are not allowing customers on the shop floor.”

At Thief River Falls, Hedrick responded with more cleaning and sanitizing of commonly touched surfaces in the terminal, providing hand sanitizer for the public using the facility, and bringing the crew down to minimum staffing.

“This means there is only one person working during the day and another during the evening so as not to have two staff working closely with one another,” he says. “The remaining staff are being paid to stay home to keep the entire shift from contracting the virus and preventing their ability to staff the Aircraft Rescue and Fighting station during passenger flights.”

With these new cleaning and distancing procedures in place, Minnesota’s airports are preparing for what their managers believe will be a gradual increase in air traffic that will likely fall well short of 2019 levels.

“We plan to return to full staff as the warmer weather gets under way and physical separation can occur,” Hedrick says. “However, I think it will take at least the rest of the year to return to normal passenger numbers, and with all the uncertainty of the virus, I am doubtful that even business travel will return very quickly.”

On the flip side, Rudningen feels that the effects of the virus may actually provide a slight advantage for smaller airports as business slowly resumes.

“As people are finding new ways to use technology, we are also being reminded that there are times we have to be in the same physical location, so I do think that corporate flying will pick up pretty quickly as states continue to open up—partly because we need to see clients and partly...
With so much of the country being told to stay home, it’s no surprise that the aviation industry has taken a significant hit. That’s especially true for Minnesota’s largest airport.

At a May 18 board meeting of the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), which operates the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and six reliever airports, leaders shared some sobering impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic—along with some guarded optimism.

Average daily departures at MSP in May 2020 were down about 75 percent from May 2019—from 501 to 124, reported MAC chief operating officer Roy Fuhrmann. But while passenger traffic was down by almost 95 percent in March 2020 compared to March 2019, the airport saw a “very slight improvement” in April. “We’ve hopefully found the bottom at around the 95 percent reduction levels,” Fuhrmann said. “In light of the activity in the last few weeks, we’re now up in the 90–91 percent reduction compared to 2019 levels.”

Reduced operations have impacted not only the MAC’s revenue, but also that of the vendors operating restaurants, kiosks, car rental companies, and other related businesses at the airport. At Terminal 1, for example, only 14 of 67 food and beverage businesses are open.

Air service levels continue to be a moving target, he continued, as airlines create a schedule and then make day-of-operation adjustments to match the passenger loads.

In March, the MAC declared a special emergency in response to COVID-19, which lays the groundwork for the airport to request aid from the state and federal government and take other emergency measures.

In addition to adjusting for reduced operations, the MAC is following CDC and Minnesota Department of Health guidelines to protect employees and the public. Those include implementing social distancing in all work areas, work from home and work rotations for staff, adjusted staff work shifts, modified police department and first responder procedures, and protective equipment and cloth masks.

“We’re trying to make those changes to be responsible, and responsive…while still maintaining the service levels that we need to have in order to continue [operating] a Part 139 airport on a daily basis.”

Following Fuhrmann, Joe Harris, director of the MAC’s reliever airports, spoke about the COVID-19 impacts on the MAC’s GA airport system.

“Without a doubt, a positive feature has been the resiliency of our partners,” he said. “It’s impressive how our airport communi-
An airport’s story: Roseau Municipal Airport

Roseau Municipal Airport (ROX)—Rudy Billberg Field is located two miles east of the city of Roseau, Minnesota, and about 10 miles south of the Canadian border. It is owned, operated, and maintained by the city.

Roseau’s first airport was opened in 1946 at a site west of the city and relocated to its current location in 1962. The airport has a 4,400-ft. paved and lighted runway and taxiway and a 2500-ft. grass strip. Services at the airport include a flight planning/arrival/departure building, heated and non-heated hangar space, paved parking apron with tie-downs, Jet A and 100LL fuel sales, block-heater outlets, and two courtesy vehicles.

Todd Peterson, community development coordinator for the City of Roseau, is also the airport manager. Peterson has worked for the city since 1996 and been involved with the airport since then, initially serving in a planning and capital improvements role.

Peterson’s experience in aviation is confined to base planning consulting work for the Air Force in a previous position with Nakata Planning Group. He assumed the position of airport manager when the airport’s fixed-base operator left in the early 2000s, Peterson says. “After 9/11, our airport, like many airports, saw a significant decline in general and recreational aviation. Our FBO found it increasingly difficult to continue… and moved on to work at a larger airport.”

Although his role as airport manager is only a small part of this position with the city, Peterson enjoys working with the pilots and operators who use the airport on a regular basis.

“Small-town airports typically are pretty unknown by most people who live in the community, so it is a bit of another world as people come and go from the airport,” he says.

The airport can be quiet, Peterson says, but its remote location makes it a vital link for both industry and healthcare. Since October 2015, Valley Med Flight has maintained a base for a helicopter at the airport and utilizes fixed-wing aircraft regularly for emergency transports. And Polaris Industries runs a business shuttle between the Twin Cities and its manufacturing facilities, which include Roseau. Besides running three to four KingAir aircraft a week into ROX, Polaris also regularly receives critical parts from delivery services when lines are shut down, Peterson says. Additionally, the Minnesota DNR has a fire watch rotor based at ROX for the spring and summer fire watch season.

The airport was named for Roseau native and Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame inductee Rudy Billberg, an early aviation pioneer, barnstormer, bush pilot, and WWII flight instructor. Billberg also coauthored a book, In the Shadow of Eagles, about his flying adventures in Minnesota and Alaska.

In the last few years, Peterson has noticed a decline in recreational and general aviation traffic. “We have a T-hangar full of dusty planes,” he says. “Without our business commuter and delivery traffic along with air ambulance traffic, our airport would be very quiet.” He adds that business and healthcare

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because people will be hesitant to ride the airlines,” Rudningen says. “I really think companies will see the benefits of handling their travel internally, and low fuel prices should encourage this flying.”

Keeping an eye on funding

Because of the significant impact of the coronavirus on the nation’s airports, the federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act is providing approximately $10 billion to support US airports experiencing severe economic disruption caused by the COVID-19 public health emergency. The funding is divided into four groups including a 100 percent federal share for 2020 Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants, at least $7.4 billion for commercial service airports, up to $2 billion for primary airports (large, medium, and small hub airports and non-hub primary airports), and at least $100 million for general aviation airports.

At Mankato Regional Airport, some of the federal stimulus money is already being put to work.

“We had some construction projects lined up that we would normally get 90 percent funded, and because the government wants to keep those moving forward, are now being fully funded,” Baker says. “I think it is important for Minnesota airports to have shovel-ready projects queued up and stay aware of any special funding that may become available to get those projects done and keep people working at the same time.”

Preparing for uncertainty

As Minnesota’s airports enter an era of unknowns, one certainty is that preparation is more important than ever. For small airports where one person is in charge of many aspects of operation, manuals and process documentation will be essential if that person becomes ill. In addition, airports should consider redundancy for key functions such as the ability and authority to issue Notices to Airmen (NOTAMs).

“We know that the real answer to this challenge lies between the two extremes of shutting everything down and doing nothing,” Rudningen says. “Take the precautions that you need to for your specific airport based on the number of people coming and going from your public spaces. Focus on the things you are able to control—but prepare for those that you cannot control.”
Resources and training opportunities

COVID-19 workshop, resources
Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, the Airport Cooperative Research Program (ACRP) had begun research on airport roles in reducing communicable disease transmission. This research is more important and timely than ever. To help the airport industry identify best practices for communicable disease response planning, ACRP is developing a guidebook with input from airport and public health officials. To gather data, ACRP will be hosting one virtual workshop and subsequent in-person workshops (circumstances permitting). A workshop in Minneapolis on July 22, 2020, is currently scheduled as a one-day, in-person workshop but may switch to a virtual format. To register, visit projects.erg.com/conferences/acrp/register-acrp-workshop.asp.

ACRP has additional resources that address public health preparedness, communicable disease and airports, emergency response, and other relevant topics to help airports respond to and manage an outbreak at trb.org/ACRP/ACRPInfectiousDiseaseResources.aspx.

Finally, for the most up-to-date information on CARES Act grants for airports, see faa.gov/airports/cares_act/

Applying pavement condition data for airports
Collecting pavement condition data is essential for managing airport pavements and ensuring safe operations. However, the availability of guidance for airports to be able to collect, apply, and maintain pavement condition data has not kept pace with rapid changes in technologies. TRB is hosting a free webinar on July 7, 2020, from 2:00 to 3:30 pm (ET) that will explore how pavement condition data are used and managed by airports. They will also identify new technologies and the future of pavement data collection. See trb.org/main/blurbs/180726.aspx for more information.

Promoting aviation education
The ACRP has recently released the publication Developing Innovative Strategies for Aviation Education and Participation. The report is designed to help develop intentional pathways for promoting interest in aviation among 10- to 25-year-olds. See nap.edu/catalog/25528/developing-innovative-strategies-for-aviation-education-and-participation.

users don’t service their planes locally, “so it is hard to justify any full-time FBO/management at our airport.”

So it makes sense that the airport’s biggest challenge right now is generating additional traffic to support needed improvement, which in turns supports additional traffic. “If you don’t have a modern airport, you won’t get the modern aircraft. So it is really critical to keep your airport current and relevant, but that costs a lot of money.”

Peterson notes that over the last five years, the city, state, and FAA have invested heavily to modernize the airport to improve runway approaches. Among the improvements are complete reconstruction of the airport’s main hangar, arrival/departure building, parking apron, and fuel system. This summer, a MALSF approach lighting system will be installed on Runway 16, improving approach minimums. “It has been a very busy five years,” he says. “We are now able to better serve and accommodate the larger aircraft required by our users.”