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 Airport Directory and Travel Guide, and the Minnesota 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.

According to Bolon, what is most valuable about the airport is its economic impact on the community. 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.

The Winona airport received a Project of the Year award at the 2016 Minnesota Airports Conference. From left: Joe Harris, George Bolon, Michelle Buid, Keith Nelson, Bill Holland, and Tom Wernex.
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 important thing is to take care of your people. Hire the best you can get and get out of their way…Life is too short.”

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.”

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%)

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