Conference celebrates 75th anniversary in Minnesota aviation

Once again, the annual Minnesota Airports Conference featured experts in aviation and aerospace fields sharing experiences and knowledge, technical and safety presentations, an industry trade show, and an awards and recognition program.

The 2018 conference also commemorated a significant anniversary for Minnesota aviation. In 1943, the Minnesota Aeronautics Commission became the Minnesota Department of Aeronautics. In the same year, a constitutional amendment was proposed (passing in 1944) to allow the state to collect taxes and build airports.

The first day of the conference featured a two-hour tour of Cirrus Aircraft’s manufacturing facilities at the Duluth airport. With stops along the way, Cirrus staff led attendees through the process of creating the company’s piston and turbine aircraft, including assembly using composite materials, painting, testing, and delivery of the final product.

At the Duluth Entertainment Convention Center, sessions during the three-day event covered airport legal issues, environmental compliance, airport common standards and technical compliances, UAV laws and best practices, airport construction safety, and public engagement—in addition to the sessions highlighted in this issue of the Briefings.

The conference opening luncheon featured Dale Klapmeier, co-founder and CEO of Cirrus Aircraft, headquartered in Duluth. In his talk, Klapmeier reflected on the company’s journey, from its beginnings in Minnesota to becoming the country’s largest producer of piston aircraft—delivering more than 6,800 SR-series aircraft in 18 years of production.

Klapmeier has been flying since he was 15 years old. One month after graduating from the University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point, he and his brother, Alan, began Cirrus on their parents’ rural Wisconsin farm in January of 1984. “We were kids literally just out of school, excited about aviation…thinking we were smarter than everybody else,” he said. “So we thought, let’s just go and start building and designing airplanes.”

Their first design was the VK-30 home-built aircraft, which they introduced at the 1987 EAA Convention in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. “We wanted a ‘cool’ airplane…So

Comfort, safety drive design at Cirrus

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Women in aviation take flight

In keeping with this year’s focus on women in aviation, the 2018 Minnesota Airports Conference highlighted three successful women who broke down barriers in a male-dominated industry. Despite different background and career paths, these women shared the belief that they could do whatever men could do—and had the drive to push through when they were told otherwise.

Dr. Margaret Rhea Seddon was one of the first six women to enter the astronaut program in 1978. A trained surgeon, Seddon worked at NASA for 19 years, serving on three space shuttle flights and spending a total of 30 days in space. After leaving NASA, she was the assistant chief medical officer of a practice in Nashville. Seddon is also the author of the 2015 autobiography Go for Orbit and was inducted into the U.S. Astronaut Hall of Fame in 2015.

Retired Air Force Colonel Penny Dieryck served as the support group commander overseeing the 148th Fighter Wing in Duluth from 2008 to 2014. Previously, she worked at the Minnesota Joint Forces Headquarters and commanded an aircraft maintenance squadron of the 148th. She’s been deployed twice to Baled Air Base, Iraq, as the Aircraft Maintenance Unit Officer in Charge. In addition, she had assignments in various U.S. Air Force bases around the United States during her career.

Julie Clark is an aerobatic air show pilot and former commercial airline pilot. She was one of the first female pilots to work for a major airline. Clark flies an average of 20 air shows a year and is rated in more than 66 types of aircraft. She is an enshrined member of the Living Legends of Aviation and the Minnesota Aviation Hall of Fame.

In a panel discussion, the women talked about how they got started, where they found support, and what unique challenges they faced in a male-centric field.

On getting started:

Dieryck said that seeing vacation photos of the families she babysat for inspired her to want to travel. “I come from a family of five girls,” she said. “Back then, you didn’t take kids on trips.” Dieryck wanted to see the world. So, not yet 16 years old, she joined the Air National Guard—without telling her parents.

Clark knew she wanted to be a pilot from a young age. Her dad was a commercial pilot who was killed by a suicidal passenger in 1964; the resulting plane crash killed everyone on board. Because her mother had died the year before, Clark was appointed guardians—and they did not support her interest in flying. She attended the University of California, Santa Barbara, and took infrequent flying lessons at the Santa Barbara Airport. Fortunately, she says, her guardians never questioned why she needed so much money for “school books.”

For Seddon, a chance conversation during a surgery piqued her interest in taking flying lessons: turns out the surgeon she was assisting was a pilot and owned a small flight school.

On barriers:

Dieryck’s first career in the Air Guard was in nondestructive inspection. “I wanted to do something with the airplanes and with my hands,” she said, but she had been told that as a woman, she couldn’t go into maintenance. “I said, ‘I don’t care what you tell me, I’m doing this.’” While there, she saw the potential for leadership and decided that she wanted to be an officer. After receiving a degree from the University of Minnesota Duluth, she returned to the base as the first female munitions maintenance officer for the 148th fighter wing. Despite a career in the guard for 35 years, she had someone as recently as 2001 tell her she couldn’t be the aircraft maintenance squadron commander because she was a female.

“I said, ‘Really? Well, guess what. That’s wrong, and I’m gonna do it,’” she replied.

Clark shared how she would call on job openings and be hung up on when the other party learned she was a woman. To land her first job as a commercial pilot—with Golden West Airlines—she had to persist for nine months and even offered to pay to have a door installed on the men’s room when that was given as an excuse for not hiring a woman.

Dieryck felt one advantage her generation had when growing up was the opportunity to play sports, thanks to Title 9. “Being an athlete helped me a lot,” she said.

“All of us had to prove ourselves,” Seddon said. “And once you did that—certainly once we got to NASA, and proved that we were willing to do the work, that we were not afraid to go through water survival training...and that we would do everything we needed to do...there really wasn’t any issue at all.”

Clark added that she felt she was sometimes tested harder than her male counterparts. “They’d say things like ‘How’d the girl
On family life:
According to Dieryck, support from spouses or significant others is vital to keeping women in the Air National Guard. “You have to teach spouses and significant others to be supportive,” she said. That’s especially true since 9/11 and the subsequent increase in deployments.

Seddon said the demands of a space career are especially challenging for family life—perhaps more so when your husband is an astronaut, too. Fortunately, she and her spouse—Robert “Hoot” Gibson—were never scheduled to be on flights at the same time. The final months before a shuttle flight were ones in which an astronaut doesn’t see their family much, Seddon said.

On being female:
Even supportive men sometimes don’t get it. The all-male team of engineers at NASA had to scramble to retrofit the toilet on the space shuttle for females, Seddon says, and they had some bizarre questions about female anatomy in the process. “They were embarrassed to ask, and we were sort of incredulous,” she said. Several prototypes were tested, but it wasn’t until after astronaut Sally Ride’s first flight that the team knew the women’s bathroom would work.

Seddon says that when telling the director of the Johnson Space Center that she and her husband were expecting, the reaction was a bit surprising. “We had been married for over a year, [but] it was almost as though they had not considered that it could happen,” she said. Since the program has previously been only men, there were no rules about what an astronaut could and could not do when pregnant. “NASA was afraid that I was going to have morning sickness and take nine months off and then wasn’t going to ever come back,” Seddon said. “So again, you had to prove yourself. You had to prove that pregnancy was not career ending.”

Dieryck related that her mother had had to quit her job at the bank every time she had a child. So when Dieryck found out she was pregnant right after getting hired full-time at Loring Air Force Base, she was terrified. “I called the guy that hired me… and I thought that I’d be fired when I told him,” she said. “He said that it was fine. That’s when I knew things were changing.”

Super Bowl LII lands in Minnesota

The Minnesota aviation community spent months planning for one of biggest events in the Twin Cities in years—Super Bowl LII. With the dust settled, Phil Burke, director of operations at Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport (MSP), and Joe Harris, manager of the St. Paul Downtown and Lake Elmo airports (MAC reliever airports), shared a few thoughts on how it went.

“I was thinking about where we were at this time [mid-April] last year. I think we were about five months into planning,” Burke began. “We were thinking about the collaboration that would be required, and we had no idea how far this was going to reach. So we got together and started talking with some of the regional airports that we wanted to pull in right away.”

Because Houston hosted the 2017 Super Bowl, Burke, Harris, and others on the planning team traveled to Texas several times to learn what they could from that city’s preparations. “The magnitude of Houston really opened my eyes, and what I was most surprised about were the number of aircraft that fly in for this event,” Harris said. He knew one challenge would be figuring out how to divide the MAC’s airport system to best maximize space. “Early on in the process we began to try out different diagrams to figure out how many airplanes we could park on the ground,” he said.

Minneapolis differs from Houston in a number of ways that would influence its hosting of the event, Burke realized. For example, Houston had extensive space around its terminal facilities, which MAC airports do not. Houston’s runways were generally much longer. And Houston airports don’t need to operate in snow and ice.

Something else the team learned from the visits was that it wanted to do a better job of branding the Super Bowl than Houston had, Burke said. “We wanted people to really know the game was in Minneapolis,” he said. “Houston was not inspirational.” The result was the Super Bowl’s “Bold North” theme, which turned up nearly everywhere in the months leading up to the game.
Growth, technology shaping MSP

Last year saw a record number of passengers at Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport (MSP), at just over 38 million for 2017. “As we all know in this industry, the numbers really follow the economy,” said Brian Ryks, executive director of the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), which runs MSP as well as seven reliever airports.

Minneapolis was the 17th highest market in the country for fare prices but has now dropped to 35th.

Growth is leading to investments in facilities and innovation at MSP. Several pilot programs involving “big data” are currently in the works. One example is the use of WiFi tracking data and business intelligence to identify traveler volumes, dwell times, and movement through terminals to ease congestion or identify sales trends.

In the past two years, MSP added 50 new retail shops and restaurants, many of which are local and regional businesses. Last September, the MAC selected 30 more restaurants to open in 2018 and 2019.

The MAC’s capital improvement program, called “MSP Reimagined,” is currently in the midst of a $1.6 billion construction plan that will run through 2022. “And then we’re also planning to invest another billion dollars out through 2035, if our forecasts continue to grow at a 1.5 to 2 percent clip, so we can serve up to 50 million passengers by 2035,” Ryks said.

An increase in the number of passengers starting and ending their trips at MSP, rather than simply connecting, has put more demand on the roadways, front-of-house spaces, parking, ground transportation, and baggage areas, Ryks said. As a result, the airport is adding 15 feet to the front of Terminal 1 and completely remodeling the ticketing, baggage levels, and vertical circulation elements of the facility.

Additionally, the airport will break ground this summer on the single largest project in MAC history—a 5,000-space parking and car rental facility slated to open in 2020.

Investments in air service may have also played a role. The last two years were record years for air service growth: 11 airlines added a total of 44 additional routes, Ryks pointed out. “Most important, we now have competitive air service on 56 of the 163 nonstop destinations,” he said. “That’s good for us. [It] means that more than one carrier is going to those destinations.”

MSP is the second-largest Delta hub in the country, with 147 nonstop destinations. Sun Country is transitioning to become an ultra-low-cost carrier and positioning itself for significant growth, Ryks noted—a plan that may include hiring 1,000 employees in the next three years, many in the Twin Cities. The newest carrier, JetBlue, began operations in early May. “The commission has been working on JetBlue for 10 years, so that gives you a sense of how long it takes to get certain carriers in the market,” Ryks said. Over the past decade, MSP has added a number of other carriers, including Alaska Air, Southwest, Spirit, and Air France.

The growth of ultra-low-cost carriers over the last 10 years has been significant. “These were nonexistent in the market 10 years ago and now they make up 5 percent of our seats,” Ryks said. One result of that is lower fares overall, he continued.

“One of the questions I always get is, why are you spending $240 million on parking when…autonomous vehicles are supposed to solve parking problems?” Ryks said. One factor was that the airport regularly runs out of parking mid-week, he said. A wildcard, however, has been the rise of transportation network companies (TNCs) such as Uber and Lyft, which have been disrupt-
“The biggest lesson I learned when we were down in Houston was just watching them as they worked through the game itself and afterwards,” Burke said. “Everybody had their job to do and there wasn’t a lot of collaboration that we enjoy as an airports community in the state of Minnesota. And we were going to utilize that strength from the get-go.”

Twenty-nine planning committees began meeting in February 2017; a final concept of operations, incorporating plans from all the committees, was completed in January 2018. The months of preparation also involved outreach to inform communities about what to expect in terms of noise and traffic. Coordinating the volunteers was another huge effort. MSP had its own set of volunteers 450 strong on a daily basis as well as MAC employees. “We realized after visiting Houston that we needed an all-hands-on-deck approach, and we needed everyone in the organization involved,” Burke said. “That proved to be so fruitful, because the day after the Super Bowl we needed everybody.”

Landside planning involved preparing for a tremendous volume of aircraft and passengers. The NFL told the MAC to plan for about 11,000 private jets arriving systematically, Burke said, but the MAC didn’t know until the week of the game where these aircraft would be landing, and which would need parking space.

The NFL uses a reservation system that required permission for all arrivals and departures, which helped meter the traffic flow. “Everyone wanted to fly in Sunday at 10 a.m. That wouldn’t have worked,” Harris said.

When the Twin Cities was hit with a snowstorm the Thursday before game day, “That wreaked havoc on us,” Harris said. The reliever airports were not expected to keep pace with the number of reservations that were in the system. “That was probably the biggest thing I worried about leading up to the Super Bowl… [But] we got 4.5 inches and we were able to keep pace… We got a chance to show some of our horsepower, and frankly, that was a rallying cry for some of the staff at our airports, to kind of show that we can do this in difficult conditions and not have delays.”

The system ended up with about 1,500 operations in private jets. MSP planned for and found parking space for 275 of those, which, factoring in the recent snowstorms, meant closing the only usable runway on game day. “There was some angst about closing that runway for parking,” Burke said. On the day of the game, 145 private jets were parked at MSP. At the relievers, about 209 private aircraft were parked at the South St. Paul airport, 90 at Anoka, and 150 at Flying Cloud Airport.

As much as they focused on activity leading up to the game, Burke knew the day after would present perhaps the biggest challenge. “With MSP, there’s one way in, one way out.” But other than one traffic clog at about 4:30 a.m. that was quickly rectified, “the rest of the day was busy but smooth sailing,” he said. Among other efforts, the airport relied on numerous volunteers to help move 65,000 people through checkpoints, when the normal volume would be about 35,000.

The peak travel time on the Monday following the game was 7:30 a.m., although the airport was steadily busy throughout the day. The airport processed 34,000 bags, about double its normal volume. “You get one failure within that system, and the cascading and the backup of bags could have been devastating for the operation,” Burke said. “That didn’t happen, fortunately, thanks to good planning.”

In terms of finances, Harris says the airports were not guaranteed anything. Private-sector businesses such as the reliever fixed-base operators (FBOs) needed to invest significantly in additional staff, chemicals, and equipment for deicing operations with no guarantee they would recoup those costs. “But it worked out great frankly because of the two teams that were participating. Philadelphia and New England, there’s tons of horsepower there.” By the week of the game, the number of advance reservations indicated “that economically it was going to work out,” Harris said.

In addition, FBOs that don’t normally interact worked together on cost sharing and other efforts. “The Super Bowl really brought our communities together,” Harris said. “We needed to understand it’s all in the customer’s interest in representing our region and rolling out a huge welcome mat. Our goal was to make sure that everybody who went through these reliever airports had a positive experience.”

The MAC will get another opportunity to put into practice all it learned as Minneapolis hosts the NCAA Final Four Championship in April 2019.
Aviation agencies address funding, security, and knowledge management

This conference is always a good way for the aviation community to hear what’s happening at their governing agencies, and this year was no exception.

Federal Aviation Administration

Kicking things off were Rebecca MacPherson, Sue Mowery-Schalk, and Lindsey Butler with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). MacPherson, administrator for the FAA Great Lakes region, began with the good news that funding for the FAA is up—at $18 billion compared to $17 billion last fiscal year. The omnibus funding bill was passed in March 2018, and MacPherson explained that because of the timing, “We’re pretty flush with cash right now.” A challenge will be spending it by end of the fiscal year. “It’s an important issue for us because if you don’t spend your money, the chances are you will lose it when they do the next round of appropriations,” she said.

In terms of reauthorization, MacPherson said that the Airport Improvement Program was fully appropriated at the same level for 2017; essential air service was funded at $25 million less than 2017. “It’s something that people in this country don’t really appreciate—how important this can be for certain communities.” One thing that was not in reauthorization was an increase passenger facility charges (PFC) rates. “It’s an issue where the carriers’ lobby has been very successful in managing to avoid any increase in PFC,” she said.

MacPherson noted a few highlights of the existing legislation relevant to Minnesota airports, including the Remote Air Traffic Control Tower Program. This initiative would allow the FAA to have a remote air traffic control system set up at seven airports to assess the operational benefits of the towers. Other airports beyond the initial seven would be added on a rolling basis.

A current initiative—the Unmanned Aircraft Systems Integration Pilot Program—is looking at whether the FAA should cede some of its air space authority to state and local government in the area of drone regulation.

Next, Mowery-Schalk described some of the safety-related efforts taking place at the agency.

“One of the things we’ve been concerned about this year is vehicle-pedestrian deviations,” she said. “What we’re recommending is better training by the airports and their tenants, and more vigilance by airport personnel. Much of the recent spike in these types of incidents was associated with vehicles that were airport vehicles. So…if you think that you have any areas [at your airport] that you could use some advice on, please let us know.”

Finally Butler, assistant manager of the FAA’s Great Lakes Region/Dakota-Minnesota ADO, addressed what was probably on many minds in the room. “Everyone wants to know about the billion,” she said, referring to the supplemental funding for airports from the general funding. “So, we’ve been asking a lot of questions: what is it? Who gets it? How do they get it? And when? We’ve been working through what that means.”

Butler noted that while all airports are fundamentally able to tap into this supplemental appropriation, the legislation specifically talks about “priority consideration” for local or regional general aviation (GA) airports located outside of a metro- or micropolitan statistical area.

The agency has not determined how it will be spent but is looking first at projects that have been reported to the Airport Capital Improvement Program, she said. Another important point is that unlike previous funding situations such as ARRA, there is no urgent rush to spend the money. The FAA has until Sept. 30, 2020, to obligate the funding, and airports will have until Sept. 30, 2025, to spend it. “We have time to be thoughtful about this,” she said.

The more important focus right now is on FY18 projects, Butler said. “We still have $3.2 billion that we need to get out the door. I know all of you have submitted your pre-applications for FY18—that’s our big focus right now…More guidance will be coming forward on the supplemental [funding].”

Transportation Security Administration

Although the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) doesn’t regulate GA airports, it does regulate certain activities at those airports. However, the bigger role the TSA plays at GA airports is one of partnership and outreach, said Rebecca Roering, assistant federal security director with the agency.

“It’s a very large aviation community, and a lot of people touch it,” she said. Those entities include airport managers, FBOs, tenants, and contractors. “When you work at an airport, you know it better than anyone else. You know what looks right, you know what belongs.” If something doesn’t sit right, Roering said, she wants people to know whom to contact to report it. “We want to be resource to you…It’s a big community of people working together to try to prevent another attack from happening.”

At GA airports, TSA inspectors perform
inspections, assessments, and tests of operations and facilities of TSA-regulated entities (such as flight training providers and private charter operations). Inspectors will talk with various people, identify security vulnerabilities, and recommend measures to mitigate them. In Minnesota, the TSA has not issued a single civil penalty to any airport, to which Roering credits the Minnesota aviation community’s collaborative approach to addressing security issues.

As part of its outreach efforts to GA airports, the TSA wants to ensure all airports have a copy of the guidance document Security Guidelines for General Aviation Airports [https://www.tsa.gov/sites/default/files/2017_ga_security_guidelines.pdf]. “These are guidelines, they’re not regulatory,” Roering emphasized. “These were developed by the TSA in cooperation with the GA community…We want to share connections. [These are guidelines, they’re not regulatory;]” Roering emphasized. “These were developed by the TSA in cooperation with the GA community…We want to share connections.

Regarding the supplemental money from the FAA, Isackson said a challenge she sees is that the things Minnesota airports need—hangars, for example—don’t compete well nationally. “A national discretionary pie on a system basis in Minnesota is not as good for us. Individual airports might get some, but we want to see overall the system get more.”

Isackson also told attendees about a new process MnDOT will be enacting to manage grants beginning in 2019. Airports will be receiving their next biennium’s Maintenance and Operations (M&O) grant offer in January 2019; signed documents must be returned to MnDOT by April 30. On July 1, 2019, MnDOT will execute those grants. “We’ve never had this kind of deadline before. What you need to understand is that if you do not get your documents back to us…you will be on your own. We will not participate.” She urged those airports who need their city councils’ participation to get on meeting agendas well in advance.

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Cassandra Isackson said a major focus of the (MnDOT) Office of Aeronautics director Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) Aeronautics has five years or less experience. In the next five years, 80 percent of the office will have less than 10 years in aeronautics. “That is the future, and that will continue to be the future for some time,” Isackson said. “We are going to be an organization that turns over about every 10 years.” The reason, she explained, is that the office hires mid- to late-career professionals.

Borrowing from NASA’s “mind map” method for managing knowledge transfer within the organization, Isackson noted that knowledge could be seen as an organization’s asset; to manage it, “You need people, process, and technology.”

“All of the work we collectively do, all the knowledge we collectively manage—the vast majority of it resides in the people,” she said. “We have to find a way for how to transfer that knowledge and do it rapidly and in a way that it can continue to transfer.”

Some steps in that direction include holding “needs meetings” with the aviation community to learn more about specific airports and share information about what MnDOT does. The office has also been connecting with more non-aviation organizations that are willing to provide funding for aviation, such as the Municipal Clerks and Finance Officers Association of Minnesota (MCFOA). City clerks play an important role in managing airports, Isackson said, so the office has begun attending MCFOA’s annual conference to help educate and make connections.

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Tips for FAA funding

“How won’t the FAA fund all of my project?” is a question consultant Marcus Watson with TKDA hears often. The FAA grant process is complex, he said, which is why he and the FAA’s Jake Martin led a session explaining FAA airport improvement grant requirements and thresholds, project eligibility, and project justification. Watson and Martin walked participants through numerous real-world examples of funding requests, the likely outcomes, and reasons for them. They wrapped up with a list of general best practices for airports:

• Prepare your project eligibility exhibits early. Start early in the Capital Improvement Program (CIP) process and talk with the airport district office a year or two ahead of time, especially if it’s a larger project. “Start to think about cost implications, and who’s going to pay for any ineligible share. Those have significant consequences on your CIP,” Watson said.
• Design large projects a year prior to seeking a construction grant. “Design grants are something that the FAA has been pushing for larger projects,” Watson said. “So that helps get you in that position to be ready for construction.”
• Separate project elements in the CIP, because different rules apply. “Project eligibility and justification does not equal project funding,” he said. “You may be eligible, you may be justified, but if the project doesn’t rank as high, especially for discretionary projects, that’s a whole separate review process.”
• Communicate with your team early and often. “Get out ahead of the requirements to avoid surprises,” Watson said. “Work with your consultant, work with your local airport officials, the FAA, MnDOT. Come together as a team and talk about the project so you’re not experiencing any surprises at the 11th hour.”
we proceeded to build a very cool, very complex, very hard to build, hard to fly, kit plane,” he said. “It didn’t take us long realize that there are very few people who want…

“...an airplane that is hard to build, and then hard to fly...So through this process, we realized we weren’t going to make it as a kit manufacturer.”

Along the way, Klapmeier and his brother also realized that what they had thought was cool and important was no longer so. Klapmeier’s wife influenced him as well. His wife, Klapmeier explained, didn’t feel comfortable or safe in other planes. What changed that, he said, was the addition of a multifunction display that made it clear where they were in flight, when they would reach their destination, and how much fuel would be left when they did.

On the safety side, people flying want to know that if something does go wrong, they’ll have options, Klapmeier said. After his brother was involved in a mid-air collision in 1985, it became clear to him that people make mistakes. “We need to have another out,” Klapmeier said. The resultant Cirrus Airframe Parachute system (CAPS) is the most visible safety item on Cirrus aircraft. Far from a gimmick, the parachute is rather an essential safety feature that has saved 150 people so far, Klapmeier said.

Over the years, the company has been defined alternately as an engineering company, a design company, a manufacturing company, and a sales company, but Klapmeier’s vision is that of a “lifestyle company.” “We create a lifestyle for our customer,” he said. “We build a product in order to have our customers taken care of... And that's been very successful for us.”

The company’s newest product—the Vision Jet—is a single-engine, seven-seat personal jet that, at just under $2 million, is the most affordable private jet on the market. “We didn’t set out to design a jet, we set out to design our customers’ next airplane,” Klapmeier said. Cirrus is working to fulfill the more than 600 backlogged orders of the plane; this year’s goal is to deliver 60.

In 2011, Cirrus was purchased by China Aviation Industry General Aircraft. Before the sale, Klapmeier said, “Every Monday morning was a day wondering how we’re going to be in business on Friday.” The Chinese buyers, he continued, “said all the right things. They wanted to learn about aviation, support aviation…and to grow aviation in China.” Since the purchase, Cirrus employees number 1,500 (up from 400) at three locations—Duluth, Grand Forks, and Knoxville, TN. “From that aspect it’s been tremendous for the company,” he said. “Where’s the next growth area in this industry? China has 1.4 billion people. The growth potential is astronomical.”