



Why Your Community Needs Its Airport

Because once it's gone, it's gone forever.

By David Esler

A dearth of open space suitable for urban development has combined with the need for cash-strapped municipal governments to seek short-term tax revenues, creating a “perfect storm” in the ongoing assault on general aviation airports.

Last year, *B&CA* reported the targeting of general aviation airports by real estate

developers (see “How to Save Your Airport,” March 2005) in order to gain land for new housing, offices and stores as a growing trend. However, in the intervening months, it appears to have gained sufficient momentum to be reclassified as an accepted practice by the land-development industry. For financially beleaguered city and county governments — as well as politicians soliciting PAC campaign contributions — these proposals can appear extremely attractive.

According to Henry Ogrodzinski,

president and CEO of the National Association of State Aviation Officials (NASAO), these developers are “the enemy” when it comes to general aviation airports, “because they are looking for large plots of land to turn into housing and strip malls, anything that they can make a buck on. They very often convince the local politicians that the airport is a drag on the tax base, and ‘Boy, wouldn’t it be better if we could put up 1,500 condos or attract some industry to put on that land?’ So it is the developers who are often the ‘first

Santa Monica Municipal Airport (SMO), from the air. Interstate 10 runs from the top center to the upper left; Clover Park is the green patch to the left of the airport. SMO's right (south) side is actually the border between Santa Monica and Los Angeles. Corbis/Douglas Slone

movers' in this scenario." NASAO and its state aeronautics members devote much of their energies to defending airports, especially general aviation relievers.

The second mover is the politicians. "They may be convinced that it's better for the community's tax base," Ogradzinski continued, "or they may, in their self-interest, be angling for a campaign contribution, so sometimes they are honestly convinced, and at other times, they're brought over by a slick developer with a nice rich PAC at his disposal."

'Aviation-Haters'

The third group of players in the airport endgame is an amalgamation of anti-noise advocates and "people in the community who either hate the airport or aviation in general — they are way beyond being just 'NIMBYs' ["not in my back yard"] — who agree with the developers and see them as saviors of sorts," Ogradzinski observed. "They would rather have anything there than the airport."

On the other hand, as it did at Buchanan Field (CCR) in Concord, Calif., this constituency may realize the proposed construction replacing the airport "will screw up their lives in other ways, like creating unbearable congestion, and that the airport and its noise isn't such a bad idea after all," Ogradzinski said. When a major West Coast developer proposed replacing CCR with 6,500 residences, a collection of malls and offices, and a college campus, anti-noise advocates in the already congested San Francisco Bay-area bedroom community were persuaded to become partisans for the airport. Described in our report last year, the proposal was ultimately rejected by the airport's operator, Contra Costa County, which had assumed its ownership as an obligated land-grant airport after World War II. An enhancement plan to improve the airport is currently under way.

"So you have a number of things going on there," Ogradzinski continued, "some rational, some based on enlightened self interest, and some deriving from plain greed and irrational dislike of aviation. Nevertheless, I don't think most people get up in the morning with the idea that they're going to close the local airport."

But it's not just general aviation airports that are under a seemingly relentless chipping away throughout the country.

Steve Brown, the NBAA's vice president for operations and a former FAA deputy administrator, claimed that the state of U.S. general aviation fields "is only part of a slow deterioration that places pressure on all classes of airports across the country. In general, because the overall economy has been reasonably healthy, whether you're talking about an air carrier airport, a general aviation reliever, even a military field, all categories of airports are being subjected to huge pressures from real estate developers eyeing the land they occupy. And as local authorities make short-term decisions in the hope of gaining some tax revenues, this places all airports under more pressure than ever before."

Historically, more private-use airports succumb to the developers' bulldozers every year, but this doesn't relieve the pressure on public-use facilities. "The military would say the same thing, as would representatives of the airlines," Brown said. "They're all engaged, to the best of their abilities, in trying to protect the airport facilities they still have. There are some places where airports can be expanded, but they are typically not where the capacity is needed the most."

Unprotected

Brown cited the late Meigs Field, arguably one of the most beautifully sited airports in the nation prior to Chicago Mayor Daly's midnight raid on the facility a few years back, as "clearly the most visible closure in recent memory. Beyond losing the field entirely, though, what was tragic about Meigs was the fact that its closure sent a terrible signal to other mayors and city councils around the country. Fortunately, so far, we haven't had any others that have come up like that."

Meigs fell under the plow because Chicago had no federal obligations to keep it open, the city's Department of Aviation having never accepted FAA Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants on behalf of the field. At the time and as we reported last year, it was generally assumed that airports that had applied for and accepted AIP funding with its binding agreements were protected from closure for at least 20 years — per grant. And that's federal law. But since then, dangerous precedents have been set in which airport authorities in at least two states have used congressional intervention to essentially annul FAA requirements to either keep fields open or not restrict their operations

Composing a 'Values Checklist' for Your Airport

A good way to get started with an airport-advocacy program is by composing a "values checklist" listing the strengths and weaknesses of the facility. Here are some areas to consider when getting started:

► Is the airport really serving the community or region in its present state? Using the guidelines stated in this report (both the main story and sidebars, especially those describing state aeronautical programs) justify all the reasons why the airport benefits your community. (See also next point.)

► In today's Darwinian economic paradigm, an airport has to be an "engine" for commerce. How is your airport generating or otherwise supporting commerce in your community or region? If not, why not? Are all the regionally based corporations and businesses in your area aware of the airport's potential value as a node in the national air transportation system? What about public-service agencies, e.g., police, fire and EMS operators?

► For that matter, is your airport truly part of the national transportation system? How easy is it to access the airport with surface transportation?

► What are the safety and noise issues connected with keeping the airport open? How is it situated in terms of residential development? If noise is a continuing issue, what is the airport management doing to allay residents' complaints? How clear, or otherwise unobstructed, are the approaches? What is the airport's safety record up to now? Has there been a pattern of accidents? If so, are there changes that could be made to reduce accidents and still retain the airport?

► What is the condition of the airport's facilities? FBO(s)? Other support businesses, e.g., repair stations, avionics shops, restaurant, etc.? Runway and ramp condition? Hangar space? Landing and nav aids? Control tower? Fire protection and security (a given, in the post-9/11 environment). Is it worth it to apply for FAA Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants? How difficult would the process be in the individual case of your airport?

if they're encumbered with open obligations from AIP grants.

In the first instance Jackson Hole, Wyo., was successful in instituting noise restrictions at its airport (JAC) after the state's congressional delegation inserted language into an unrelated House bill stipulating that the airport could bar access to Stage 2 aircraft despite FAA nondiscrimination rules. This gives one pause to wonder if the move emboldened the city of Rialto, Calif., to employ the same tactic in order to close Art Scholl Memorial/Rialto Municipal Airport (L67) for real estate development.

"This one represents a really scary precedent," AOPA Vice President Bill Dunn told *B&CA*, "as local development interests were able to go over the FAA's head on an AIP obligation by appealing to their congressman, Representative Jerry Lewis [R-Calif.]. In the waning hours of the 2005 congressional session, he attached an amendment to the Federal Highway Transportation Bill allowing the city of Rialto to close the airport and sell the land to developers."

It seems FAA grants were originally used to purchase more than half of the 453-acre

facility's property. "And get this," Dunn said angrily, "although \$15 million in AIP funding has been invested in the airport, *the spoils of the sale don't go to the FAA* — 55 percent goes to the city and 45 percent to San Bernardino International Airport [a converted U.S. Air Force base]. So the FAA gets back the unamortized portion of the airport development grants, less the acquisition of the land . . . [or] about \$300,000 on the sale of property, which has been valued at more than \$4 million! The good news, if there is any, is that it literally took an act of Congress to close the airport. These vehicles don't come along that often. For them . . . a lot of things aligned at the right time to make this happen. There are 153 based aircraft at that airport which will now have to be relocated."

In their defense, Rialto officials claim Art Scholl Memorial is a "money pit" and that the city can no longer afford to operate it. However, the AOPA believes the municipality intentionally allowed the field to deteriorate to the state where it cannot support itself through traditional forms of revenue like ramp and hangar rents and fuel flowage fees.

"Most elected officials have never seen a

ALL CATEGORIES OF AIRPORTS ARE BEING SUBJECTED TO HUGE PRESSURES FROM REAL ESTATE DEVELOPERS EYING THE LAND THEY OCCUPY.

development plan they don't like," Dunn said. "In many instances, what we're finding is the flat land of the airport is the last developable property in most communities. Instead of having to level a hilltop, all they have to do to make an airport into a shopping center is bulldoze what's there and start over."

Clear Need for Capacity at Existing Airports

Looking at the bigger picture beyond the real-estate crunch and the threat it poses to the general aviation relievers in terms of potential closures, there is a clear need across the board for more capacity at the nation's busiest airports. With sales picking up, more than a thousand aircraft are being added to the overall fleet every year, and operators are flying more than ever before, increasing the pressure on airport infrastructures for more runways and runway extensions, better lighting and additional nav aids.

"In the places where that is needed, like Los Angeles, it is a virtual impossibility," the NBAA's Brown said. "In fact, what is normally happening is that there are proposals for enacting even more constraints, so it is going in the wrong direction in that respect, [and] that's largely a failure of local zoning."

The New York metropolitan area is a similar story. While the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey has brought some improvements to Teterboro (TEB) in the form of new taxi configurations, run-up areas and ramps, and revised approach procedures designed for more efficiency, Brown claimed "there is really no prospect of lengthening runways or adding additional ones there or at any of the primary air carrier airports."

Consequently, business aviation advocates must be alert to local initiatives limiting the usefulness of airports or restricting their operations, "because we can't afford to lose any of the access we have," Brown pointed out. "Any time there is an opportunity through technology or some limited airport

grants to improve the service, capacity or efficient use of the existing infrastructure, people need to get behind that and optimize what we have.”

Returning the spotlight to Los Angeles, Brown cited Van Nuys (VNY), ranked the world’s busiest general aviation airport and, with more than 450,000 operations annually, among the top 20 busiest U.S. facilities, as a prime example of the wrong-way trend to limit capacity. Of the 800 aircraft based at VNY, more than 120 are jets.

“Van Nuys was in the middle of orange groves in the 1940s and -50s, and now there isn’t buildable space within a seven-mile radius of the airport,” Brown said. So with no room for expansion and thousands of homes and businesses butted up to the fences, considerable pressure is being placed on the field’s operator, Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA), to limit operations.

This culminated in 2005 with the commission of an FAR Part 161 noise study. Ongoing, the study, required by the Airport Noise and Capacity Act (ANCA) when an airport operator desires to institute proprietary noise controls (i.e., a noise limit specific to the airport), is expected to continue for at least another year. “They are looking at the potential economic benefit and cost of limiting operations at Van Nuys,” Brown said.

“I was there [in June] to meet with the LAWA and city reps, their contractors doing the study, and our members based on the airport. Basically, we got a sense of where they are in the process, the kind of public outreach they will take and its schedule, and how they will gather the economic information on the costs and benefits. I was satisfied that the people engaged in performing the study are qualified and professional.”

On the other hand, Brown wasn’t satisfied that all the factors that should be considered in the VNY Part 161 study — the “impact points” — have been put on the table. “That will be the role of the NBAA and our members. At Van Nuys, a lot of the people we talked to say they regularly operate nonstop between the East and West Coasts, and one of the things under consideration is a reduction in the hours of operation of the airport. This measure, if adopted, would reduce the working day and limit the flexibility of those operators, thereby diminishing the usefulness of the airport.”

If the number of operations is lowered at VNY, Brown predicted, fewer tax revenues will flow to the city from the businesses that depend on the airport. Ironically, LAWA itself claims the airport contributes a whopping \$1.2 billion annually to the Southern California economy and that the facility “creates job, promotes business and

The FAA's Position on Acts of Congress to Close Airports

B&CA asked the FAA's Airport Safety and Standards Division director, David Bennett, what the aviation authority's position was regarding the use of congressional legislation to override federal grant obligations so airports could either be restricted or shut down. Here's his response:

"We think the general laws relating to airport access are very clear and support the FAA's position in enforcing reasonable access to airports and keeping them open in accordance with federal obligations such as AIP funding and surplus property disposal," Bennett said. "I think the exceptions you cite [the Jackson Hole Stage 2 ban and Rialto airport closure] show that it takes a law to do that [i.e., discriminate against a class of aircraft or close an obligated airport]. Only two or three airports per decade are released from these obligations, so it's very rare. The acts of Congress show that that's what it takes. It would be of interest to us, however, if it became widespread."

Concerning encroachment outside the fence lines, Bennett admitted that this "can be a problem. Incompatible land use adjacent to the airport can act to restrict the utilization of the airport. We agree with NASAO [National Association of State Aviation Officials] that local governments should not condone land use that will ultimately restrict airports. We have put out model standards that we encourage local governments to adopt and assist them in a number of ways, all of it short of control by the federal government. But we do expect local jurisdictions to do all they can for their airports, communities and the NAS."

Pressure Points

When a general aviation airport is closed, *B&CA* asked, is additional pressure placed on other airports in an area, particularly the commercial hubs? "If an airport is federally obligated," Bennett answered, "it is because we have found it to be an important part of the national airport system, both in terms of

access and, in many cases, to relieve commercial airports of GA traffic. But we also understand that they can be important just for access to the community as well as reducing congestion at the bigger airports."

Bennett cited the FAA's National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems as the linchpin of the U.S. airports system and the basis for identifying candidates eligible for AIP grants. In that regard, NPIAS currently recognizes more than 3,300 airports deemed significant to national air transportation and thus qualified to apply for the funding. It also includes estimates of the amount of AIP money needed to underwrite infrastructure development to raise airports to current design standards and add capacity to those considered congested. The FAA is required to provide Congress with a five-year estimate of AIP-eligible development every two years.

The current report, covering 2005-2009, states that 98 percent of the U.S. population resides within 20 miles of an NPIAS-funded airport, based on data from the 2000 census. Quoting from the report: "The NPIAS is comprised of all commercial service airports, all reliever airports and selected general aviation airports. It includes 3,344 of the 5,280 U.S. airports that are open to the public. . . ."

Concerning the density of NPIAS airports in terms of their accessibility by the general population, the report claims that "Commercial-service airports are within 20 miles of 66 percent of the population (77 percent when reliever airports are included). When general aviation airports are also included, 98 percent of the population is within 20 miles of a[n] NPIAS airport. Of the total U.S. population of 287 million people, all but 5.4 million live within 20 miles of a[n] NPIAS airport."

The full report can be found in the airports section of the FAA Web site at www.faa.gov.

provides vital general aviation and emergency services."

If You Can't Ban 'Em, Restrict 'Em

Meanwhile, at nearby Santa Monica Airport (SMO), local authorities, goaded by ongoing noise complaints, have been agitating for some time to shorten the field's single 5,000-foot runway (3/21). "The reality here, though," Brown pointed out, "is that they want to limit the size of aircraft that can access the airport to reduce both noise and the number of operations."

According to Brown, the need for more capacity among Los Angeles' airports also "reinforces the tragedy" of the loss of El Toro Marine Air Station in Orange County to aviation when the base was closed in 1999 and the space approved for mixed development. "There we had all the infrastructure we needed to expand in the Basin, and the elected officials just couldn't get it together to do it."

Still in the Golden State, Oceanside, just

north of San Diego, is framing its attack on its airport in an alternative land use study intended to decide "the highest and best use" of the property occupied by its airport (OKB). As in Rialto, the city claims it can't afford to operate the airport, but the AOPA believes the city government is determined to neglect the field.

"There was some discussion that one of the 'big box' stores wanted to build an outlet there," the AOPA's Dunn said. "Two of the five members of the Oceanside City Council support keeping the airport open, and three want to close it and reuse the land. [One council member also serves as mayor.] We're working closely with the Oceanside Airport Association, and I'm heading out there in a couple days and will spotlight these issues in the local media."

The airport has received AIP grants, but according to Dunn, the "party of three" thinks it can pay the FAA back. "It's an uphill battle. I think it's a winnable issue, though, as there's an election later this year for two of the council seats."

Another threat to airports of all stripes is incompatible land use around airfields, resulting in encroachment that creates all sorts of problems, ranging from potential safety risks to noise complaints and restricted operations. Some airport advocates believe that in cases where local governments have been unable to close airports outright, allowing incompatible land use (e.g., building homes and commercial structures along the fence lines), is evolving into a tactic to ultimately gain control of the land for development. As John Sibold, Washington state's director of aviation, pointed out to *B&CA*, permitting encroachment is often the first step in an orchestrated plan to close the airport.

This apparently is what's going on at still another Southern California airport, Jacqueline Cochran Regional in the desert community of Riverside, where the county that owns the field is considering a proposal by developers to modify the land-use compatibility agreement with the airport so

they can build 883 residences on 279 acres of buffer property.

“The expected impact, based on our experience in these issues,” Dunn said, “will be complaints about safety and noise and attempts to enact curfews and limit aircraft types accessing the field. It’s an obligated airport, but they will still try. Like so many local governments, [the entities that run these airports] are infatuated by the short-term money and lose sight of the value of the long-term airport.”

Creating Tension

Washington’s Sibold observed that “allowing things in that don’t sit well in an airport environment, you will create tension between the airport and the community.” This then increases the likelihood of encouraging even more public opposition, stoking an adversarial climate, which is just the opposite of what the airport needs.

“If you allow a garbage facility next to a residential area, you will create tension,” Sibold said. “So why do that when you can zone for compatible uses? In cases where it does happen [in Washington], then we say, ‘OK, then you need to cluster it and provide open areas of green space.’ We look at safety data, and where aircraft might lose an engine or have a problem in the pattern.”

Ratcheting up the density of housing in the airport area is then guaranteed to produce more complaints from residents. And despite how quiet modern aircraft are under Stage 3 and 4 rules, noise then becomes a “perception issue.” This can all be avoided with proper planning and zoning, Sibold believes from his own experience running Washington’s DOT Aviation Division.

Despite the California examples cited here, Dunn and others interviewed for this report believe that the state has put together one of the best systems in the country for preventing inappropriate land use around its airports. (Sibold said Washington has patterned its successful airport-defense program after California’s.) That’s especially good since in 2004, California was host to 263 public-use airports, the third highest in the United States behind Texas (369) and Alaska (312). The California system requires every county in the state to have an airport land-use commission, or ALUC, and to maintain a comprehensive use plan for acreage within two miles of an airport that specifies what is or is not compatible with the facility.

“At Cochran Field, Riverside County is trying to get the land-use plan changed to allow higher [building] densities in response to the developer’s plan,” Dunn explained.

“It is NASAO’s position that inappropriate land use around airports hastens the

injury or demise of those airports,” Ogradzinski said. “If you allow encroachment up to the fences or industry to erect a tower at the end of the runway, you are endangering your airport. Many times, I’ve gone to the FAA and pointed these things out, and they’ve responded that ‘Zoning is not our business — it is the locality’s business.’ So I knew this would become a difficult row to hoe [as] . . . there

were limits to what both the federal government and the states could do.”

So three years ago, NASAO and the FAA began working together on a land-use initiative intended to create a national framework for protecting land around airports from inappropriate use. “Both organizations compiled a joint statement of agreement on the subject. It’s not just about noise,” Ogradzinski said, “it’s about

compatibility. What could be built nearby that would detract from the airport's safety and usefulness? Remember, these are essential public facilities. You have to protect them as such."

Do You Really Need Your Airport?

With modern city governments being pulled in so many directions by ever-escalating — and often conflicting — demands for services from residents and business, with declining tax bases, unemployment issues, crime, educational needs and all the other problems that fill our nightly news reports, how can they be convinced of the importance of retaining a cash-neutral or cash-draining municipal airport when developers are telling them how much money they can rake

in by replacing it with condos and strip malls? How do you persuade a community that it needs its airport as a fully functional, unencumbered public asset?

First, as NASA's Ogrodzinski observed, "If the airport doesn't have a 'champion,' it's toast." He meant someone like Toyota Motors Gulfstream captain Pat Carey, who took on the leadership role in the late 1990s to save Hawthorne Airport (HHR) in Los Angeles. (In recognition of his efforts, Carey received a *B&CA* Vision Award in 2002.)

Then the champion — either an individual or a group — must begin an organized campaign to educate local officials, residents, and business and industry as to the value of the airport as a public asset. The first place to start is by compiling a

"values" checklist. Then a liaison must be established with the public to show how the airport and general aviation not only touch their lives personally but what it represents to the future growth of the area, that it's a long-term asset benefiting the overall economy and quality of life.

The AOPA has long described general aviation airports as portals to the larger world, and Ogrodzinski agrees. "I'm very often on the road, and when I'm talking about GA airports, I describe them as local gateways to the world — with your airport you can get anywhere in the world, you have access not only to the National Airspace System but the international airspace system. If you order something on line and don't live in a metropolitan area, you will in

Practicing 'Airvangelism' in Oklahoma

Out in Oklahoma — the birthplace of business aviation, according to state aviation director Vic Bird — they practice what they call "airvangelism."

"Airvangelism is an awareness campaign, letting average citizens know just how important the aerospace industry is in our state," Bird told *B&CA*. "The second part of it involves telling them how important their GA airports are. I simply make people aware of something they take for granted."

Aerospace is one of Oklahoma's top three industries, providing more than 140,000 jobs, a \$5 billion payroll and industrial output of \$12 billion a year. "From the time of Clyde Cessna, who started in Oklahoma, aviation has been important here," Bird said, proudly. "We are recognized as one of the six major centers in the world for MRO, and accordingly, American Airlines has established its largest maintenance base in Tulsa. Additionally, we have the U.S. Air Force Logistics Center at Tinker Air Force Base, employing 26,000 people and providing a \$3.5 billion impact in the state."

But it was the 111 general aviation airports distributed throughout Oklahoma that Bird wanted to talk about, especially about their value in attracting both industry and business aviation to the state.

"For example, Idabel, Okla., in the southeast corner of the state, hosts significant Weyerhaeuser Forest Products and Tyson Foods operations, employing 2,300 people, and one of the reasons why both of these companies sited there is because of the presence of the airport [404] with its 5,000-foot runway. The town is not close to any commercial airport: It's at least 2.5 hours from DFW, at least three hours from Fort Smith, and four hours from Oklahoma City. Being able to get there in a business jet is important to those two companies.

Business Jets Replace Greyhounds

"And we have examples of that all over our state," he continued, "major corporations like Michelin and Dollar General, which have, respectively, a plant and a distribution center in Ardmore collectively employing 2,000. Ardmore has two jet-capable airports [ADM and 1FO], and both companies have identified those airports as reasons for being there. Business doesn't come calling in a Greyhound bus

today — it arrives in a business jet."

There was a time when Idabel had some concern about sponsor commitment at its airport, Bird said, "but 10 years ago there was a strong focus on what the airport could mean in terms of economic development in that community, and since then, it has been well protected. My predecessor assisted in that regard, but it was a grassroots recognition of the role the airport played that saved it. Those fields are truly a way to the world for communities like this, a real lifeline."

Oklahoma hasn't been greatly confronted by airport closure threats of late, but Bird did mention one field that he has concerns about. "The airport at Grand Lake [309], a major tourist attraction, has fallen into the hands of a private individual," he said, "and that has caused concern with us and the FAA, because together, we have about \$1.5 million invested there. We want to get it back under public control. There is massive development in that area, lots of home building, and we'd feel better if it's back in public hands because there are developers who'd like to get that land."

Grand Lake had been owned jointly by the county and a public trust. As part of a settlement following a series of lawsuits involving the trust, it wound up being conveyed to the airport manager. "He's said he intends to keep it public but has to make money from it," Bird said. "He wants to construct 'hangar-homes,' which the FAA adamantly opposes, and so we don't know what his next move might be. The AOPA has weighed in on it on behalf of us, as did the EAA [Experimental Aircraft Association], and the NBAA adopted a resolution supporting our efforts to get it back to a public facility. We are pursuing this in both federal and state courts."

Bird contends that the birthplace of business aviation was Oklahoma as a direct result of the oil boom centered in the Tulsa area in the early 20th century. "Companies like Phillips Petroleum chartered Wiley Post to fly their executives around," he said, "and they learned quickly that they could get there faster by aircraft. All of the refiners started flight departments here in the 1920s and 1930s. We have really deep aviation roots. It's a legacy we aim to protect."

all likelihood have to rely on a FedEx, UPS or DHL general aviation aircraft bringing your package to your local airport. So the airport is a hub of commerce and your community's front door to the world."

The public-service argument is even more compelling, especially in the wake of last year's hurricanes that devastated the Gulf Coast. "Look at the aftermath of those storms," Ogrodzinski said. "General aviation airports became staging areas for the National Guard, the Red Cross and other NGOs [non-governmental organizations]. I spoke to several airport operators after Katrina and Rita, and those airports became places where people went because the airport had fuel, or it had large buildings still standing that could be used for shelter. So they gravitated naturally to the airport to find it not only a place of comfort and solace but their lifeline to emergency services, because there was nothing left in the community to fill that gap."

And since every airport is part of a larger network, "aviation alphabet organizations" were able to arrange critical resources and services to be transported from other unaffected airports to those requiring assistance.

"My point," Ogrodzinski concluded, "is that clearly in terms of natural disasters, hurricanes, fires, flooding or heavy rains, these airports serve as lifelines. How are we going to get supplies in or evacuate people if we don't have airports?"

At the NBAA, the business aviation lobby is taking the approach in its airport-advocacy efforts of promoting the fact that airports exist for reasons other than just tax benefits and are part of essential infrastructure, serving a broad range of purposes. "It's a never-ending crusade as to why it's important to keep visible the full value of airports on a local and national basis," Brown said. "We are often seen as a small special interest as compared to the broader public and all of their issues, so we need to develop a public understanding of the value of airports to their lives in the same context as highway and rail infrastructure."

So what do you tell cash-poor municipal governments struggling to provide basic services to their communities? Why should they avoid the siren call of the developers who promise them a short-term financial solution to their problems in exchange for their airport's land?

"I try to find out what the community thinks of its airport and of itself," Ogrodzinski said. "For example, some communities are tourist destinations interested in luring people to the area, or they often talk about tax breaks to attract business to the area. I will remind them that the CEO of that company they want to give the tax break to so it will put its plant there



Aurora/Getty Images
Airplanes illuminate the night sky while coming and going from Van Nuys Airport, California.

will fly into the community's airport in a company aircraft. In other words, the airport is an important business asset to support sustainable local development.

"It's important to tell people who are not aviation oriented that we have a national system of airports," he continued, "and that if they are, for whatever their reasons, interested in closing their local airport, they need to know they are pulling an important brick out of their wall, that is, disconnecting themselves from a national transportation system."

Dunn at the AOPA added, "What we ask them is if they want to close the interstate off-ramps to their communities. We tell them the NAS is an interstate system in the sky, that one mile of asphalt on a road takes you one mile, while a mile of runway will take you anywhere in the world. The U.S. Department of Commerce recently updated the impact of GA airports in its 'RIMS-II' economic model and discovered that, for every dollar generated on an airport, another \$2.53 is generated in the community it serves, and that equates to jobs and payroll. Many businesses will locate a facility based on the presence of a GA airport.

"If they have a developer in their midst who's committed tens of millions of dollars to the city treasury, sure, it's an uphill battle," Dunn continued. "It's always a challenge. But the message we have got to get across is that whether your airport is a

How Washington State Encourages Compatible Land-Use Planning Around Its Airports

It's not just the land within the airport boundaries, stupid. As ever more airports are saddled with noise and operational restrictions due to encroachment by homes and commercial properties, the importance of compatible land-use planning has never been more obvious.

As John Sibold, Washington state's aviation director, pointed out to *B&CA*, often allowing encroachment of inappropriate real-estate development signals the first step toward ultimately closing the field. Consequently, encouraging proper land-use planning is a major component in the Washington DOT's airport preservation program.

"The best way to describe our role is that we are tasked with preserving the state aviation system, with the understanding, of course, that the airports are controlled by local ownership," Sibold said. "Because of that fact, our job can be difficult, and we approach it several ways." In addition to providing money and resources to airports, especially smaller fields that can't qualify for federal grant money, the state vigorously pushes a compatible land-use program. "I'm the [airport] custodian here," Sibold explained. "I don't own the system, so I have to encourage local jurisdictions to protect their public assets."

Thus, Washington's airports program isn't as much about advocacy as it is a vehicle for presenting airports as transportation assets and providing assistance to local jurisdictions for proper land-use planning. "We try to convince them not to adopt land-use measures incompatible with the airport, often the first step to closure," Sibold continued. "So in the 1990s, the Washington DOT Aviation Division, following a model developed in California, was able to convince the state legislature to pass a law requiring local jurisdictions to protect airports as essential public facilities."

The second step was an amendment to that legislation recognizing that, for certain assets deemed to be essential public facilities, like airports, a higher standard of protection was needed. "The legislature accepted how difficult it is to [site new airports] . . . in these times, so it is essential to protect what you already have."

So the legislators gave the Aviation Division authority to provide technical assistance to land-use authorities, counties and cities. "It requires that when they are updating their comprehensive land-use plans and get to aviation, they are required to contact us so that we can come in and give them advice as to what has to be protected. We have done that in the majority of counties in the state — 60 of them."

In the case of airports and land use, the Aviation Division approaches local jurisdictions, and attempts to work with their officials and planners to develop policy and zoning that meets the intent of the law. "Different approaches are taken with each airport, as every situation is unique," Sibold said. "In urban environments, for example, it's more difficult because the land is more valuable. What we ask of them is to zone it for aviation and light industrial use so there won't be a negative impact by building the wrong structures close to the airport."

Development Attracts Development

Being able to affect this process is essential for the long-term health of the airport because, as Sibold put it, when you allow certain development to occur, it will attract other development. "Since small airports are often unable to pay for themselves with the business that's generated on the field, municipalities don't see them as high in value, so they'd rather take that land and develop it. So it's important to get a head start at airports that don't yet have land-use problems so they can be zoned for protection and to keep their operators focused on that pro-airport philosophy. Where you have airports closing, it's where there is a lot of urban pressure." Although Washington recently lost privately owned Evergreen Airport in Vancouver, Sibold claimed the program has been generally successful in defending the state's other fields.

For cases where a jurisdiction disagrees with the state's airport land-use policies, a mechanism has been written into the law allowing airport users to file complaints with the state's Growth Management Hearings Board if they believe that the airport's policy doesn't follow the intent of the law. "The

Hearings Board takes cases from individuals from both sides of the argument as to whether or not the policies of the airport comply with the intent of the law," Sibold said. "In all of our cases where these complaints were filed, the jurisdiction was required to go back and revise its policies to do a better job of protecting the airport from incompatible land use.

"The state has the authority to file, as well," he continued, "but we rarely do, as we believe it's the public's responsibility. The legislature was clear — they don't want Big Brother in there, they want people to negotiate with each other [since] they recognize that every issue is different. Every jurisdiction has to get public comment from our agency on our plan. We're only addressing land-use outside the airport boundaries. All land use within the boundaries, if it's federal, is subject to approval through the master plan process."

The "problem" state aeronautical commissions face in these times of restricted municipal budgets boils down to this, Sibold said: "If you have an extreme urban environment and are running out of land, any property like the airport is an important tax base, maybe the only one. If you can't figure out the value of the airport in a way that makes sense, then there's pressure to close it."

But public assets don't always have a financial rate of return — there may be cost associated with them that must be absorbed or justified by the long-term value they return to the community, in the case of general aviation airports, as key components in the transportation infrastructure. "One big mistake that we [as a nation] made in the past was selling off our rail systems," Sibold pointed out, "and look what happens now when you want to build a light-rail system.

"When people argue with me on the money and jobs issues," he continued, "I tell them that it's not about the 'rich pilots with their toy airplanes,' it's about the transportation asset. You're supposed to be thinking about the future. There may be cases where there are multiple airports [in one location], but you have to think long and hard about giving even one of them up." In

Washington, the compatible land-use program is the primary tool in Sibold's toolbox for creating awareness of that present and future value.

Get Involved in the Process

Sibold said airport backers can assist the state in protecting these public assets by getting involved carefully and intelligently in the political decision-making process — that is, not being adversarial but working with local jurisdictions as advocates for transportation. This can take the form of appointments to boards or even running for office. “When communities take away airports, where do they think these airplanes are going to go? You have to plan for the future, and if you're turning the landing fields into retail development, those facilities will never come back. The aviation opposition votes and gets onto city councils, so if you're worried about that, you'd better run for office.”

When Sibold and his people approach a community engaged in discussions to chuck the airport for strip malls and big box stores, “we find the pro-aviation council members who will sway the others. You have to find reasonable people who understand it, and you have to understand that it gets political.” So it's to the airport advocates' advantage to get involved in the master planning process and offer acceptable compromise solutions.

But again, the approach that airport advocates, especially pilots, take must be carefully considered to avoid polarizing the situation; i.e., it's a good idea to work with people, not against them, toward a compromise that preserves the airport and allays the reservations of the anti-aviation factions within the community. Yes, this is hard work and always tedious, but according to Sibold, you get more by being a positive force for the future of transportation in your area than by opposing the process.

Sibold, an active pilot who flies his own Cessna 180 on “slick” floats, occasionally gets frustrated with activist pilots who, just like the city councils that see only the short-term profits to be reaped from replacing the airport with development, fixate only on the airport and not on the future and the challenges facing the community.

“They don't look at the big picture,” he said. “You have to be involved in the modern-day issues, what needs to be done to allow airports to survive. In public parks, they're doing multiple-use activities, in one case up here combining a seaplane base with a lakeshore park. That's a good model for airport advocates to look at — that is, multiple use that is compatible with the airport. You gotta' be smart about this, and it takes work.”

Pilots must be sufficiently savvy to understand that “in today's environment, you have to be careful and politically sensitive — you don't want to create a problem that didn't exist before,” Sibold warned. “Pilots and operators and advocacy groups have to understand how to ‘work’ the community and be aware of the sensitivities around the airport. You can't all of a sudden raise enormous issues about the airport; you have to be in step with the community when you talk about further development of the airport, to work with them and have public meetings so people fully understand what you're doing. You can't do any of this in a vacuum any more.”

Sibold cited Blaine Airport (4W6) on the Canadian border, whose management put together a master plan to extend the runway, “and when the master plan went out for comment, people objected to all the money that was going to be dumped into [an] airport ‘with very little usefulness.’ What got published was what it was going to cost, and that's all people saw, not the arguments in favor of the airport and the future of aviation in the area. You can't look at the value of the airport today — you have to project the need, say, 20 years out. . . . The public should have been more involved along the way. You can't just go and raise major issues around the airport that will create consternation without first working hand in hand with the community.”

So Sibold urged airport supporters to “figure out the ways to make the airport valuable to your community. If the numbers don't support it, you have to show people the public asset value that the airport represents. It's about how the government has to provide certain public resources.”

large one or a small GA field, you have single-engine piston aircraft being delivered at a higher rate than ever per quarter, more people are flying, and we have to keep the airports open.”

Maintaining the Status Quo

It being nearly impossible to expand an airport today, let alone site a new one, just retaining what we have is a full-time job for all stakeholders. “[It] requires vigilance and the willingness to step forward and be active with local officials and city councils to make it apparent how valuable airports are in terms of social values,” Brown at the NBAA said. “When you look at post-Katrina and the role those airports [on the Gulf Coast] played to help preserve the economic fabric of those areas, you see the value of the community airport.”

Brown cited a panoply of airport advocacy resources the NBAA makes available to its members to assist them in articulating those values to the government entities controlling the destiny of their airports. Listed on the organization's Web site (www.nbaa.org), they include an airport advocacy CD that enumerates the aforementioned values airports provide the community and suggestions on how to develop airport support groups that can work with local government as well as citizen neighbors to develop broad-based support.

From the alphabet groups to state aeronautics departments vested with preserving their aviation assets to individuals engaged in the front lines of the ongoing fight, everyone *B&CA* talked with said community involvement is the key to success.

In his peregrinations around the country, Ogrodzinski said he's seen examples of airports getting “adopted” by local groups in exchange for having use of some of the facilities for their meetings. “Not only that, but they get exposed to aviation and learn about what it does for the community. Some airport managers will open their hangars for community affairs. This is true community outreach. You have to build a network of support and then engage the local media, which is always looking for newsworthy stories.”

This support can also counter news from the pro-development side explaining why the airport should be deep-sixed in favor of big-box stores and subdivisions. The more people get to know their airport — its expanses, its typically light activity, its relative quiet — the better they can appreciate its merits against its would-be successor. And just as the citizens of Concord discovered, in the end the airport looks like a pretty neighbor, just the way it is. **B&CA**