GUEST EDITORIAL

No higher priority

Your future's at stake, help save the airports.

By James B. Taylor

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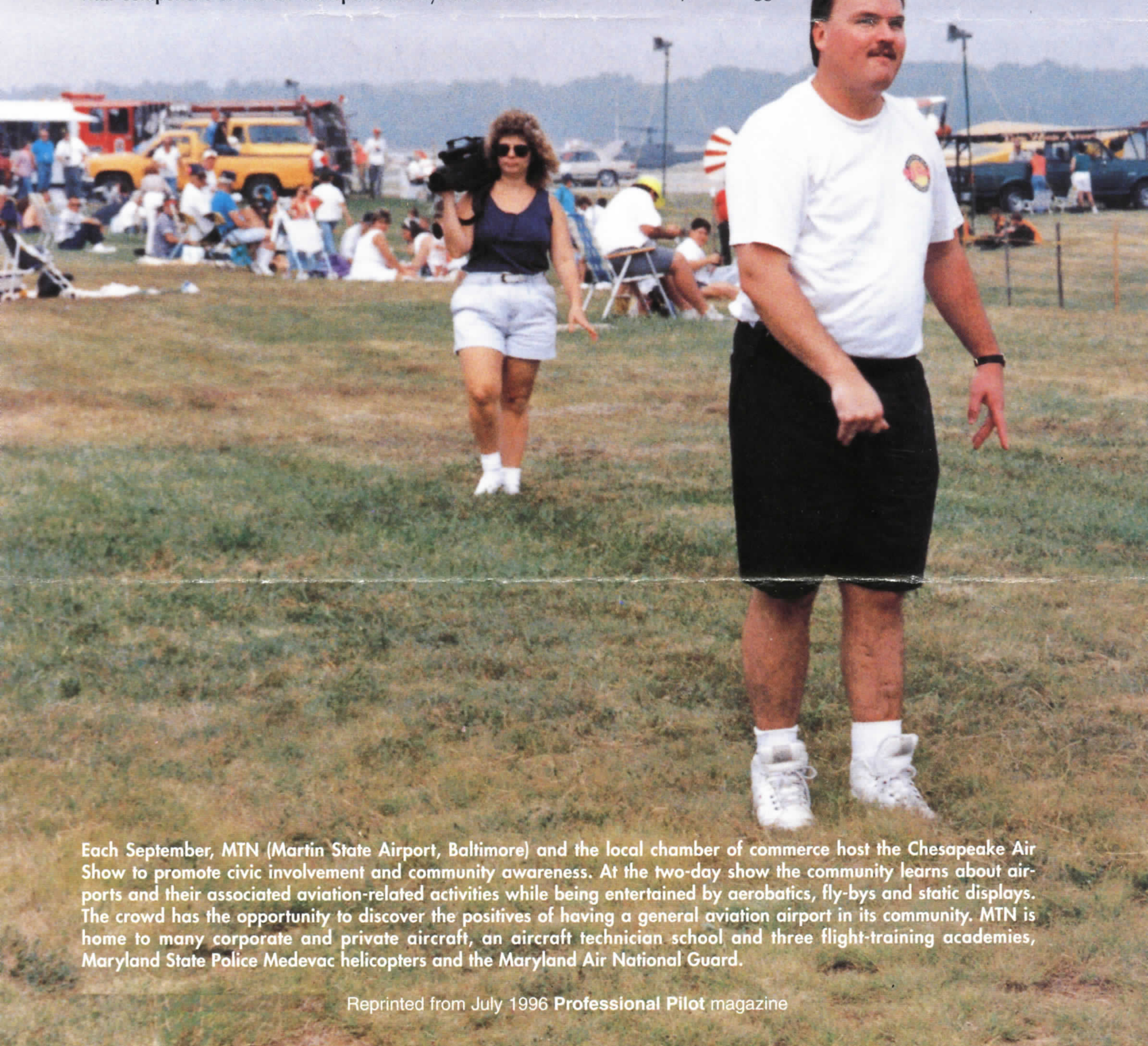
AS professional pilots, can you imagine life without airports? That's crazy, you say, too ridiculous to contemplate. But think about it. We're losing an airport a week. William T. Piper, Sr., builder of the ubiquitous Cub, put it best: "Having an airplane and no airport is like having the only telephone in town."

Next to the flying machine itself, airports are the most vital component of the air transportation system. Yet even today many of them continue to be prime targets of over-eager developers, radical environmentalists and myopic municipalities. Just in the last 25 years, we've lost more than 20% of our public airports. And dozens of others are stagnating, falling into disrepair or becoming dangerous because of increasing residential encroachment.

Generally, the biggest



Each September, MTN (Martin State Airport, Baltimore) and the local chamber of commerce host the Chesapeake Air Show to promote civic involvement and community awareness. At the two-day show the community learns about airports and their associated aviation-related activities while being entertained by aerobatics, fly-bys and static displays. The crowd has the opportunity to discover the positives of having a general aviation airport in its community. MTN is home to many corporate and private aircraft, an aircraft technician school and three flight-training academies, Maryland State Police Medevac helicopters and the Maryland Air National Guard.

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complaint against the local airport is aircraft noise. As a result, some airports, to placate the natives, have imposed operating restrictions, including the curtailment of night flying and strict noise abatement procedures. In many cases, large planes are unable to safely meet the new limits.

Ironically, the ground level noise of small aircraft is less than the ambient sounds of a busy office or nearby freeway. Much of airport noise is in reality a "perceived" noise. When the Concorde first flew into JFK during FAA tests, angry New Yorkers, fearing sonic booms would shatter their homes, jammed airport roads in a mass protest. But with the beginning of scheduled service, they soon discovered that their imagined fears were just that—imagined.

One of the worst examples of municipal myopia is the city of Bridgeport CT, which controls BDR (Sikorsky Memorial Airport) in the neighboring town of Stratford. Since 1966, Stratford voters and the town council have overwhelmingly rejected a proposed runway extension every time it came up.

The only thing that's changed in the last 30 years is that the need for longer runways, better lighting and better airline service is greater than ever. Yet despite the solid case for improvements, the present airport administration appears apathetic. (Pathetic is a more definitive word.)

As so often happens, meaningful progress is being blocked by local politics. No one has yet figured out how to neutralize a small but highly vocal coterie of suburban protesters who view the airport as an evil threat to lives and property. That the airport is in an excellent location geographically to attract more business, produce more work and fill the area's idle plants, is of no concern to anti-Sikorsky extremists.

Sikorsky is accommodating some corporate jets; Flight Services Group, an aircraft management firm, bases its fleet there. But the new generation of business jets and other heavier, turbine-powered transports require more than 4677 ft, its longest runway.

The airport is already one of the state's busiest. Last year Sikorsky had approximately 112,000 takeoffs and landings, primarily general aviation operations. Also in 1995, USAir discontinued all but four of its flights from Sikorsky. And Business Express not only moved out of Sikorsky but out of the state as well. General Electric headquarters in Fairfield (10 minutes from the airport) and other area companies are forced to base their corporate jets elsewhere, such as HPN (Westchester County) at White Plains NY.

The cost of improving Sikorsky is not a factor. The FAA will pay up to $14 million of it, provided the improvements include the longer runways, new clear zones, a new lighting system and other safety upgrades.

Opponents also argue that extended runways will endanger area wildlife, create more traffic, more noise. Proponents, among them executives who currently commute to airports in New Haven, Hartford, White Plains or New York, counter that an expanded airport would generate more industry, more jobs, more revenue for the community as a whole. No matter how convincing their position, the positive aspects of the issue fall on deaf ears.

Friends of Sikorsky Airport (FOSA) and other supporters aren't giving up, however. They've already succeeded in another political arena. In 1993 their efforts helped change Connecticut's property tax on corporate and personal aircraft to a much more reasonable—and realistic—registration fee. As one result, it cut the cost of basing a Challenger in the state from $666,000 to $2500 annually.

Incredibly, the Connecticut legislature is now considering a new bill that would enable municipalities to invoke a personal property tax on all civil aircraft operated under FAR Part 91. The consequences of such discriminatory tax policy are obvious. It would encourage more corporate and private plane owners to move out of state, further crippling Connecticut's ailing economy.

This initiative is puzzling. Connecticut is widely known as an air-minded state. (Remember, it passed a resolution a few years ago supporting claims that the late Gustave Whitehead, who lived in Fairfield, actually flew a powered aircraft in 1901, some two years before the Wright Brothers.) The state, in fact, operates several airports, including BDL (Bradley International). If the state bought Sikorsky the problems there would be solvable.

Another high-use public airport at risk is CGX (Meigs Field), a huge contributor to Chicago's downtown economy. Built in 1946 on a site originally constructed for the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, Meigs has long been a highly visible lakefront landmark. It was named for the late Merrill C. Meigs, noted publisher and a widely respected aviation advocate.

If Mayor Richard Daly has his way, Meigs will revert back to the Chicago Park District and be turned into a recreational park complex. He sees it as an airport that mainly caters to a select clientele of the rich and famous.

That's absurd. Corporate aircraft offer a flexible mobility unattainable in scheduled airline service. Such flexibility is essential in our modern competitive business world and his honor should also know that private planes do not compete with the airlines, they complement them. Often a company in a small community will use its aircraft to fly employees to points where they can connect with commercial carriers for long cross-country and international flights.

The truth is that each year Meigs handles more than 50,000 flight operations, more than 90% of which are related to downtown business. The annual economic benefit is conservatively estimated at about $57 million, not to mention the more than 1500 jobs this airport supplies to the Chicago area.

Here again a group of local aviation activists, the Friends of Meigs Field, was formed to reverse the city's decision. But they urgently need more support, particularly from corporate operators who find Meigs a highly desirable alternative to all the surface and air traffic congestion at MDW (Midway) and ORD (O'Hare). The airport's lease with the Park District, incidentally, expires in September.

Fortunately, most states and cities consider the airport as a valuable, indispensable asset. BGR (Bangor International), for instance, has already put that city on the global map. Maine's largest and best known airport, much of BGR's success can be traced to the city's leaders. They were perceptive enough to see how the airport could benefit Bangor—economically, culturally, internationally. Today hundreds of transatlantic flights land at Bangor to refuel, allow passengers to clear customs or take on fresh supplies.

Though owned by the city of Bangor, BGR is self-sufficient. Its $15 million annual operating budget comes from airport leases, terminal users and businesses serving tenants and the public. Once an Air Force base, it shares facilities with the Maine Air National Guard, an Army helicopter squadron and a Naval Reserve unit.

TUS (Tucson International), operated by the Tucson Airport Authority, is also self-sufficient. It is also used jointly by the Arizona Air National Guard. Although Tucson is usually touted as a holiday destination (tourism is Arizona's second largest industry), almost 50% of all air travel through its airport is business related.

TUS's direct economic impact on the Tucson community, measured by total payroll, local expenditures, tourist expenses and general aviation, topped $863 million last year. And if you crank in the multiplier effect, the dollar infusion in the Old Pueblo could very easily double.

Up the interstate at Phoenix, PHX (Sky Harbor) has an annual economic impact of more than $11 billion on Maricopa County alone. With an annual payroll of some $650 million, it is the direct source of more than 19,000 jobs. Because of its size and the plans for expanding TUS, the idea of building a huge "megaport" midway between the two cities has been all but scrubbed. But don't be surprised if Arizona's visionary concept of a major international gateway surfaces again in the not too distant future.

On a smaller scale, OLS (Nogales International) on Arizona's Mexican border enjoyed a 400% increase in its activities and gross revenues in less than three years. It's a good example of what can be accomplished when you mesh a progressive governing body with a competent, energetic, experienced manager.

In 1994, the Santa Cruz County board of supervisors recruited Larry E. Tiffin to lift OLS out of its doldrums. A former World War II auxiliary military training field, it showed every promise of being a profitable commercial enterprise. But it lacked direction, imagination and, most of all, merchandising. And as a port of entry, activity fluctuated in fits and spurts.

Enter Larry Tiffin, late of Prescott AZ, where for some 15 years he had operated a successful FBO. He arrived on the scene shortly after a new terminal building was opened. And recently the single 6040-ft runway was extended to 7200 ft.

Today OLS averages 150 flight operations a day, including pilot training, transient and other flying. The lone FBO, Tiffin Aviation, offers full service 12 hours a day, seven days a week. Rental and charter aircraft are also available. The airport has 16 hangars now (several of them multiples) and 10 more are being added. Customs provides 24-hour service on a daily basis. And the terminal's cafe serves the "best eggs benedict in the American Southwest."

Other communities can learn from the synergistic relationship between the Nogales airport's owner and its manager. Moreover, no new airport program is approved without public input. Gross income is approaching $500,000 and the annual volume is expected to rise sharply when an adjacent industrial park is completed.

More and more companies are finding OLS a convenient reliever airport for Tucson less than 60 minutes by car to the north. Its longer runway, friendly atmosphere and scenic surroundings combine to make OLS a pleasant, comfortable stop for fuel, customs, border shopping or whatever. And it's attracting the heavier jets—the Gulfstream IVs, Challengers, Hawkers, Falcons and Learjet 60s.

Aviation analysts who recently reported that "increasing the number of pilots is the key to industry growth" should be pleased to know that Tiffin Aviation is aggressively promoting and selling flight instruction. Besides American and Mexican nationals, the airport's current training load includes students from as far away as Japan.

The point of all this is simply that in communities where the local airport might be in jeopardy, the fundamental problem is more than likely to be one of public attitude. Even when DFW opened in 1974, there was some residual resistance. (Since then DFW has attracted a host of new industries to both cities.) The same could be said for the new DEN (Denver International) some 20 years later. Both suffered growing pains. The new $5 billion ($2 billion over budget) DEN still does, though its performance is much improved.

In the US alone more than 6700 American companies operate more than 9700 turbine-powered aircraft. Thousands more fly piston planes in the pursuit of business. And some 5500 public airports are served by corporate aircraft, compared with less than 700 by the scheduled airlines.

But the corporate fleet is steadily growing. Adequate funding of general aviation and reliever airports is more critical than ever for the continued expansion of US airport capacity. And military airfields targeted for closure should be retained as civil landing facilities, wherever practical and feasible. Joint civil-military use makes a great deal of sense, if the air bases have no strategic role in our nation's defense.

Who will pay, of course, is a tough question, now that the Aviation Trust Fund is running out of money. As this is written, however, there is every indication the aviation excise tax, which expired January 1, will be reinstated. Meanwhile, FAA commitments to ongoing but unfinished airport projects will be honored, or at least that's what we've been told.

Also, about 75 of the country's 100 largest public airports have a $3 head tax on passengers using their terminals. They supplement federal development aid with the revenue. It's likely the other 25, including Tucson International, will levy a similar charge in the near future, since it is already authorized.

We cannot afford to lose many more airports. They are the lifeline of both private and commercial air travel. Biggies like the new Denver International and DFW come along about once every 20 years. And that's not only because of the enormous cost, it's also because more than 75% of all airline traffic in the U.S. is concentrated at only about 50 existing hub airports.

In combating negative arguments, prospective airport sponsors might also stress the importance of flying facilities to national security. In time of war, the nationwide network of airports forms an integral part of America's defense apparatus. During national disasters, the airport also becomes a critical staging area for air rescue missions and emergency communications.

America's airport system is indeed a viable national resource, yet its problems are global in scope. The advantages of recent trade agreements won't be fully realized until the world community improves its aviation infrastructure and makes possible fair access to all segments of air transportation.

Foreign authorities must be made to understand the benefits of private and corporate aviation to their own economies. Inadequate airport capacity and inequitable user fees not only impede sales of U.S. business aircraft abroad, they also constrain the productive utilization of the thousands of corporate planes already in service worldwide.

Most problems are people problems, whether the people oversee an airport or live near it. Popular beliefs and attitudes are the issue, not the airport's worth. Facts alone are seldom persuasive when confronting emotional convictions. Some of us may need a short course on the opinion-making nuances of our society.

Maybe aviation interests should establish a National Trust for Airport Preservation, a coalition of all the other industry alphabet organizations. NTAP might emulate the venerated American institution that saves historic buildings and battlefields, or even take a cue from the highly effective ecological zealots who protect the whales. But its main purpose would be to educate the public on the many tangible and intangible economic and social benefits of human flight.

Better yet, let's apply tried and proven marketing techniques. They've worked well in our democracy for more than 200 years. After all, the real art of selling a product or a point of view is the ability to change somebody's mind. It is the heart and soul of salesmanship, and it can be summed up in two words—overcoming objections. And that's what it's all about.

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