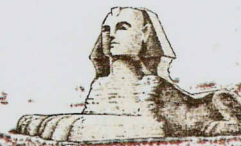


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## Airports provide economic benefits to area, state

*Study says state receives \$40 billion in economic benefit from publicly-owned airports*

BY MATT BARBA

MT. VERNON MANAGING EDITOR

Whether as a venue for community events or a location for small businesses, the roughly 80 publicly-owned airports in the state of Illinois serve as an economic engine that generates more than \$40 billion in financial activity.

The majority of that \$40.9 billion amount, about \$36 billion, is gener-

ated as output from the state's commercial service airports, such as Chicago O'Hare International and Bloomington-Normal's Central Illinois Regional Airport.

Of the remaining \$4 billion the local output of the four area public airports, which includes Centralia Municipal; Mt. Vernon Outland; Salem-Leckrone; and Vandalia Municipal is just under \$30 million, according to a February 2012 study by CDM Smith, which looked at total economic impact of airports in Illinois and quantifying it in terms of employment, payroll and output.

Chris Collins, manager of Mt. Vernon Outland, explained that the study was broken down to look at both direct economic impact

and the indirect economic impact of the money generated through the airport.

"They look at direct impact, which is payroll and a tally of all of the gross sales of all of the tenants, then you add in fuel sales, and you get what they call the direct impact," said Collins. "But the indirect impact is how many times they estimate money that originated at the airport is recirculated back into the community."

CDM's study gathered information from airports using a standardized form that looked at both airport tenants, including fixed base operators, restaurants and independent maintenance contractors, and visiting pilots and passengers.

The impact for Mt. Vernon's airport that was presented by the study indicates nearly \$19 million in total output, a number that Collins said is bolstered by the unique nature of the airport as more than just a flight field.

"We have a lot of unique tenants out here between SRT Aviation, ARDL and AirEvac and the others that a lot of airports in Southern Illinois don't see," said Collins. "This field is way larger in infrastructure than any other airport in the area but that also allows us to be fully commercial certified."

Other businesses that call Mt. Vernon's airport home are Evans Aviation, Wilkey's Cafe, ProjectResourcesIT, LLC, Hertz and Kash Helicopter Services.

Among the unique assets at the airport is its ability to handle aircraft repairs for everything from light sport aircraft to small jet aircraft. "We have a knowledgeable and diverse group that works out here," said Collins.

According to CDM's study, Mt. Vernon's airport is directly and indirectly responsible for 149 jobs with the total payroll of those jobs amounting to \$4.9 million.

Mt. Vernon also serves as a regional maintenance operation and Collins said it is the only Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) certified repair station from Springfield south to the state line.

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## Airports:

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The future of Mt. Vernon's airport will be at Innovation Park, a new hangar complex that is being proposed for the southern end of the airport, where some will remember back in the 1970s the original terminal building was located before it had to be moved to its current location to accommodate larger aircraft and increased operations.

"It's exciting because we're taking a previously unused, dilapidated space and we're bringing new life to it," said Collins.

After a new hangar is built then grant funding will kick in to pay for a new road, approach ramp and return the foundations of former buildings there to an even grade, which will allow for future construction.

Collins said he sees the airport also as a community resource with events like this weekend's Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce Home Show as a perfect example of how others in the community can utilize the space available.

"Right now they're setting up in one of our hangars and this weekend it's going to be full of people. We want to encourage that, we want people to think of this as a place for the community. We host YMCA classes out here, we have counseling groups that meet out here. We do more than just act as an airport," said Collins on Friday.

Mt. Vernon's airport throughout the year also plays host to a number of aviation events, including several fly-ins.

CENTRALIA AND AIRGO

Being more than just an airport is important to survival at

a small municipal airport, explained Rodney Resch of Airgo, Inc., the fixed-base operator of Centralia Municipal.

Airgo operates an international flight school out of Centralia and sees students coming into Southern Illinois from all across the globe, many of which are from Asia and India.

"We have a strong overseas presence and we're currently working on a contract with a Chinese company to train pilots for them," said Resch. "The international flight school is our mainstay for the numbers we generate."

According to CDM's study, Centralia's airport is responsible for about \$3.5 million in economic output. The study also indicates that the total number of jobs created by Centralia Municipal is 40 with a total payroll of about \$1.1 million.

Currently Airgo's flight school has about 15 full-time students and several more part-timers, Resch said. With the Chinese contract nearing completion he said that number could be more than 100 students a year.

"Initially we're looking at getting a group of 30 students but that would bump up significantly," he said.

Making it possible for Airgo to do this is the fact that it is SEVIS (Student and Exchange Visitor Information System) certified, which basically allows for it to issue student exchange visas for trainees.

Resch said he is also anticipating the school seeing additional interest from individuals as more and more companies begin looking for new pilots.

"There is a pilot shortage that we've been anticipating for years. About five years ago the retirement age was extended by five years so a lot of guys just stayed in but now we're going to start seeing attrition through retirement,"

said Resch.

He explained the process is a trickle down effect where major airlines will pick up pilots from regional carriers who grab pilots from other companies that recruit from flight schools.

The FAA is also changing its rest requirements for airline pilots, making them more strict, which will mean that more pilots are needed to fill in for that downtime.

Assisting with pilot training is a new computerized testing system that was recently installed that helps with testing pilots, as well as other personnel that require specialized training, such as U.S. Postal Service workers and Transportation Safety Administration agents.

Helping Centralia continue to provide those services is a \$303,300 grant from the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) through the state's Local Airport Improvement Program. A local contribution for the program will bring the total amount of the project to \$337,000.

Those funds will be used to rehabilitate the Centralia Municipal terminal building and maintenance hangar parking lots, according to grant information.

Resch said, "Our main parking lot is original to the airport and it's deteriorated to the point that we have just as much gravel as we do concrete. We actually caught wind of this program two years ago and decided to apply for it."

"We provide maintenance and fuel and when people are flying into Centralia our airport is the first thing they see. We try to have a good looking terminal and this is one of those improvements that we not only need but will also improve the appearance of our airport," he said.

Centralia Municipal currently offers 24/7 self-serve refueling, an option that makes it attractive to light-

sport aircraft pilots, and Collins said that is an option the Mt. Vernon airport is looking at as part of Innovation Park.

VANDALIA MUNICIPAL

Chad Feldpouch, manager of Vandalia Municipal, said his airport has a number of amenities that support its operations but it is local industries that represent many of the operations that happen there every month.

"We've got at least three commercial operators coming in and out weekly," said Feldpouch. "We also have a couple of helicopters that while they're not based here they use it for standby operations or to stop and refuel."

He also said there are several agricultural operations that utilize the airport depending on the season.

The total economic output of the airport, according to CDM, is about \$4.7 million. A total of 45 jobs are created either directly or indirectly through the airport's operations with payroll for those positions amount to \$1.3 million.

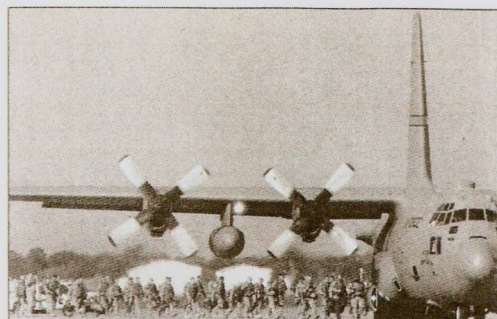
Formerly a skydiving company operated out of Vandalia's airport but as Feldpouch explained an incident forced the company to go out of business.

SALEM-LECKRONE

At Salem-Leckrone Airport the services offered include flight instruction and aircraft rental, as well as self-service fuel, according to Robert L. Tate, the airport's fixed base operator.

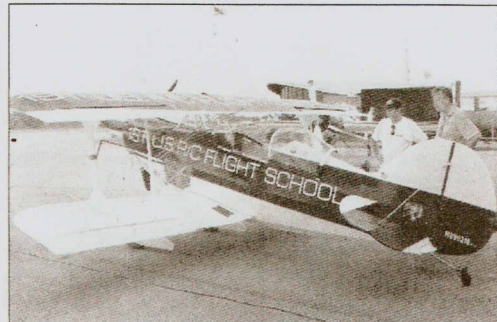
"We have maintenance buildings and hangars to store aircraft," said Tate. "We do maintenance on airplanes that are both stored here locally and that are brought in from throughout Southern Illinois."

Tate added that while the airport no longer operates its own charter service he is capable of getting a charter plane into Salem for anyone



Submitted Photo

**OUTLAND AIRPORT** — Illinois National Guardsman board an Illinois Air Guard C-130 Hercules during an airlift at the Mt. Vernon Outland Airport last summer. More than 400 National Guardsmen flew out of and back into Mt. Vernon's airport on seven C-130s in July.



Sentinel File Photo

**LECKRONE AIRPORT** — Steve Johnson, RIGHT, of Tennessee talks plane facts with Dave Scott as Scott prepares his plane for a turn to practice aerial maneuvers during an event in 2011 at the Salem-Leckrone Airport. The airport holds a number of events every year, including the annual Salem Regional Aerobatic Contest, hosted by the International Aerobatic Club Chapter 61.

that needs one.

Economic output for the Salem airport is \$2.2 million, according to CDM. The total employment impact of the airport is 19 jobs with more than \$500,000 in payroll.

Salem's airport, like others,

also serves as a gathering place for pilots and the community who are interested in learning more and sharing about various aircraft through annual events held at the airfield.

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