

Mt. Vernon's Outland Airport major hub of activity for aviation enthusiasts

By RICK HAYES

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MT. VERNON — A fixture in Mt. Vernon's past, present and future, Outland Airport has progressed to become a major hub of activity for aviation enthusiasts.

In addition to serving as the host for one of the city's largest annual celebrations — the July 4 Salute to Freedom — the airport serves as a meeting place for several local organizations. The YMCA, Mid-Continent University, Mary Kay Cosmetics, and the Jefferson County Chamber of Commerce are just a few of the organizations that take advantage of the spacious facilities at Koziara Terminal to host their events. Additionally, several aviation events are held at the airport throughout the year, while the Veterans Memorial Hall of Fame, the adjacent museum, and Wilkey's Cafe brings back airport visitors on a regular basis.

"From my standpoint, from it was several years ago to what it is today, it has progressed quite a bit," said Mt. Vernon Airport Authority Chairman Greg Martin. "Even though the economy has gone south a little bit, we've taken the initiative to be more aggressive and thinking about the future instead of worrying about what happened in the past. With the new hangars we've built and Innovation Park, it's amazing what's going to happen in the future."

Martin, who came on the board in 2005 about the same time that Chris Collins was hired as airport manager, added, "I'm glad to be a part of it, and it takes a lot of people to do it. We have a leader



A ribbon-cutting was held in 2011 for the new hangar at the Mt. Vernon Airport. Local and state dignitaries participated in the event. Lipps Construction of Mt. Vernon was the general contractor on the project.

in Chris, who has spearheaded all of this. Without him, it wouldn't have happened."

Martin said from a taxpayer's point of view, "One of the things I'm most proud of is what we pay to the airport and what we get out of the airport is far and above what we pay in. For the value of your money, your getting more than a bang for your buck."

Collins interjected, "If a taxpayer pulled a tax bill in our district, they would find that our rates are one of the lowest in the county. I know some people think the airport is useless if they can't get on a commercial airliner and go somewhere. Sad to say those days are in the past. It isn't anything we've done or haven't done. Max Firebaugh had it right when he said a couple of years ago it probably isn't going to happen again because of the close proximity to St. Louis and Evansville and nice, paved interstates. What you're seeing out here is the buy-in of the team concept and the buy-in of the niche we have chased, which is maintenance and sales. All of the airplanes around us at all the surrounding airports are coming here

for maintenance. I'm really proud of that and it speaks volumes about our fixed base operator staff and their knowledge, capabilities and experience."

He added, "Having Leland (Widick) here, the FFA examiner, the only one in the southern part of the state that is not affiliated with a college, is a plus because it allows someone to get a new rating or a pilot's license has to come to Mt. Vernon. All those things are working and they're bringing new tenants and business here."

Martin said there were no pre-conceived notions of the airport developing a niche, rather, circumstances have led to the creation of a marketing tool to enhance future development.

"Things have evolved. We started out thinking, 'Here is a problem or issue we need to solve.' We solved that and got going and that created an opportunity for something else. Each opportunity that we achieve creates another opportunity," Martin said.

"The maintenance thing was on the radar. Whenever we found Rich, Shawn and Tom (SRT Aviation) we knew

we had an experience levels far and beyond a small airport in the Midwest capability," Collins said. "In the past, the administration had good maintenance too. We just had some capabilities beyond what was here previously. We've been saying for five years that when this economy turns around we think we've got a great foundation laid for future development. With the maintenance and the sales, the

dealerships, the FFA examiner, and the restaurant, along with the museum and Hall of Honor, we try to do everything we can for the community. We try to be all things to all people and sometimes that is difficult."

Martin added it's all a matter of being prepared.

"Even if you look at the logs of the planes that land and take off, the numbers have improved. What we want to do is be prepared and ready for them. Instead of reacting to what happens, we want to be proactive and have things in place so when the opportunity comes, we don't have to jump through hoops."

After having built one hangar that has already reached near capacity — that 107 by 104 building was dedicated in May 2011 — officials are now progressing toward construction of a second new hangar and accompanying ramp for its Innovation Park project in the southwest quadrant of airport

property.

"This kick starts the future planning for new opportunities of the airport. That whole quadrant now because of the state grant taking all of that old infrastructure out we can develop spaces for anyone wanting to locate here. That is exciting, scary, but exciting," said Collins, who noted the project has been on the Airport Authority's radar for several years, but was recently funded through the Illinois Department of Transportation, Division of Aeronautics.

"This will be the first private public type of opportunity at the airport. Bonding cycles was always the way to capitalize the airport. We're jumping off into new territory and that's how airports are capitalized in the big cities," Collins commented.

"It's just amazing how [the new hangar] exploded. The opportunities that came from

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A single airplane occupies space in the newest hangar at Mt. Vernon's Outland Airport. The hangar was built two years ago and is already near capacity, according to airport officials. SUBMITTED PHOTO

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it was nice. I can't believe we filled it that quick, or used it that much that quick," Martin said.

The new hangar is occupied by Kash Helicopters, Withers Broadcasting, a mining company and Evans Aviation — the latter which will occupy the Innovation Park hangar when it is completed.

As for the future, Martin says the Innovation Park project should spur further growth.

"I have a vision for what we're doing at Innovation Park, for commercial businesses outside the aviation industry."

"I have visions of other entities coming in northeast of this project, of businesses and industry coming in. We planted the seed, and I'm ready for it to grow and

spread," he said.

Collins added, "I like to think of us as an incubator for businesses, small and large, especially affiliated with aviation. We have to be prepared and have spots ready at Innovation Park or we lose opportunities."

Martin said when he joined the board a lot of people questioned his reasoning, but the chairman of the Authority said he is committed to the community and its growth.

"I've lived in this community my whole life and my thinking was why not? I still don't know much about aviation, but all of us have a common purpose: Do the right thing, be honest, take care of business and let the person who knows the business do his job. All of us feel that way. We may not agree on all issues, but if you look at the voting record, we all agree on what we're doing and where we're headed."