

# Airport director reflects on year

*Several projects are currently underway at the airport*

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MT. VERNON — As the end of the year quickly approaches it is good to look back at recent accomplishments and the history behind it, and that is no different for Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

In order to understand the airport's present one must first look at its past and humble beginnings, starting in the 1930s before getting statewide recognition in the 1950s.

"There were some pioneers at the airport, with Earl Outland being the main one," said Chris Collins, the airport's director. "The airport started on the corner of Airport Road and Stinson Drive, I think a single hangar and an administrative building.

"I think it was in May of 1955 when we became our own entity with tax levying capability and the ability to sell bonds to further development of the field," Collins said, "and that was the catalyst for growth."

Today the airport covers roughly 1,000 acres and has over 20 buildings and a particular time frame stood out to Collins for the airport's expansion.

"Most of that growth was back in the 60s when those airport forefathers had the vision of growing the facility with the perceived growth of Mt. Vernon," Collins said. "You have to realize that was back before the interstate system was fully developed. So the idea was we were going to be an airline service that connected to the national airspace system. And they did, they pulled it off."

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According to Collins there was a shift occurring at that time in the industry, when carriers were bringing in better equipment, going from twin-engine piston airplanes to twin-jet service.

"All of those things kind of happened in the late 1960s to kick off what you see here today," Collins said.

### LOOKING FORWARD

Not all important changes for the airport happened in the distant past, as Collins reflected on a recent change.

"Probably the number one biggest addition that has happened in the past two years is the capabilities of our maintenance shop, SRT Aviation."

The improvement to maintenance capabilities came at a fortunate time as Collins explained that the FAA issued a mandate for new transponder technology.

"It is way of electronically enhancing vision and safety. All airplanes operating in a controlled airspace have to have this technology in 2020," Collins said. "And that is thousands of aircraft across the country. So we are in the pipeline of doing these radio installs. It has brought a lot of business from outside Jefferson County to Mt. Vernon."

Currently the Airport Authority only employs four people, as Collins discussed the various businesses that lease at the airport.

"Everything here on the facility is leased. So the company that handles all aviation matters is SRT Aviation — whether that is the maintenance, parking, fueling, oil cells — all of that, that is a leased entity," Collins said. "So every office you see in the terminal, that businesses that are located here, they all pay a lease amount to be here."

Other companies there include Applied Research and Development Laboratory (ARDL),



Submitted Photo

**IN THE SKY — With another year almost in the books Mt. Vernon Outland Airport continues to see new programs and projects. This picture was taken during the Experimental Aircraft Association AirVenture Cup Race and is one of many events the airport hosts for the community.**

AirGo, Kash Helicopter Services, and many more.

There have been several ongoing projects at the airport including the recent deicing services offered, as well as the implementation of an airport viewing system this past year that allows anyone to view a 24-hour stream of the airport. Currently the airport is also looking to change to a newer front entrance sign.

A longer term project for Collins and the Airport Authority is Innovation Park.

"We have always been focused on a southwest quadrant of what we call Innovation Park. That is where the airport was in the 50s and 60s. It was abandoned in the early 1970s and then everything moved here. We started building that back up about four years ago. We have one building down there and we have addressed the infrastructure to phase one, which was to remove the building foundations and return it back to green grass."

Collins said that Innovation Park would eventually be completely redone.

"Phase two is going to be mod-

ifying the electrical infrastructure in that area. Then we will come along in a few years and put a new ramp in and address some other places on the ramp side, self-service fuel pumps," Collins said. "Eventually that area will look like a totally new frontal area."

He said, "That is probably the focus of this board moving forward, of making Innovation Park an attractive new destination for any airplane companies or airplane supply, or anything like that we could attract here."

Overall, Collins was proud of the economic impact the airport has had on the community, as referenced in a report that showed they had around an \$8 million economic impact. But Collins also expressed that the study did not cover non-aviation businesses at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

"We figure that we have about \$11 million of direct economic impact and we only levy \$330,000. So the return on investment from the taxpayer is around 1,900 percent." Collins said. "And I am so proud of that."

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