

# Airport continues its course of progress

BY RICK HAYES

MT. VERNON MANAGING EDITOR

ince the main runway became a hard surface nearly 60 years ago, progress has been constant at Mt. Vernon Outland Airport.

Another constant is the leadership of the Mt. Vernon Airport Authority, which has had just six managers, starting with the airport's namesake, Earl Outland. The remaining managers have been Max Firebaugh, Vince Water, Jim Zimmer, Gerald Nicholson and Chris Collins, now in his sixth year.

"It's an honor to work with five board members that are progressive and are looking for the future of the community," said Collins. "These guys are very receptive and open to ideas of what can we do to make this airport and this community better. We've had open arms and a positive outlook on anything we can do to bring growth," said Collins. "I have to be honest, I think aviation is tough right now because of the high cost of fuel, insurance and just the cost of getting into flying. We're very fortunate to be in the position we are right now."

Firebaugh, who served as manager for 23 years, thinks the current expansions at the airport are headed in the right direction.

"I'm excited about it. There have been some new buildings here and expansion plans for the future. Chris and his airport board have done a remarkable job in what they're trying to accomplish. The general activity has picked up tremendously. I think the airport is very important for the community's growth in the future," he said.

When Outland passed away in the fall of 1966, Firebaugh was tapped as the manager.

"When I took over the airport, there was nothing here. The operations and airport office was down where the maintenance hangar buildings are now. They were put in place there about 1950 or thereabouts. This was kind of a swamp land and that was about it," Firebaugh said.

Firebaugh said there was a lot of construction in the early 1970s.

"When I came, it was just in the works of airport expansion. The FAA [Federal Aviation Administration] was planning on expanding a number of airports in the state of Illinois and Mt. Vernon was one of eight that they were wanting to improve," he explained. "I got here in the early planning stages of the airport, and construction started in the new area about 1972 or 1973. The main runway was here. I think it was only about 4,500 feet. I think there were two expansions. There was no taxiway at the time. It was just

an undeveloped taxiway to the runway."

Firebaugh said at the time, and one of the reasons for expansion, is that airlines were expanding.

"Ozark was considering coming here, of course, they had to have a certain amount of runway. General Tire was in the process of building here about that time, and they had company airplanes at that time and there were several business people in Mt. Vernon that had aircraft. That's really what helped the expansion," Firebaugh said.

Ozark had commercial flights out of Mt. Vernon from 1962 to about 1980, he added.

#### ESSENTIAL AIR SERVICE CEASED IN 1999

Essential air service ceased in 1999, which virtually cut off subsidizing commercial flights in the Mt. Vernon area. Collins said he would like to see its return, but he remains doubtful. He said it's one of the questions he is most often asked when out in public.

"We've had some providers come in over the years, and I've talked to them. Most carriers want \$1 million up front cash to start service. There's only one of two ways to come up with that money: One, raise it in the community; and secondly, government subsidies like essential air service. It's an application process ... if we took the time to put together a good, honest effort and submit it to Washington, D.C. ... there is only \$30 million that they dole out," Collins explained.

"One of the first things they're going to do is get the map out and look at demographics and they're going to see how close we are to a major airport, which is St. Louis Lambert. And now with Evansville Regional being more and more of a carrier airport, now we have an airport within 90 minutes of a nice, paved interstate drive from ours. Our population base isn't high enough, and there's not enough manufacturing jobs that would pull or put people on the airplanes. When you apply for the grant, there has to be a huge need. Airports that are three or four hours from a major airport are the ones that are going to get essential air service grants," he said.

Several years ago, under the leadership of Manager Vince Waters, the airport authority offered leasing options, which resulted in the eventual location of ARDL [Applied Research & Development Laboratory] and Air Evac.

"I lay that at the feet of the board at that time, which was led by Russ Withers at that time. Russ had the forward-thinking vision to see that an airport needed more than just aviation to survive. ARDL had a fire at 17th & Perkins and they were looking for a place to go, and even other communities were chasing them. Russ and

Vince opened up a place around the lakeshore and some of the things that sold ARDL at the time was the security we had out here, and also being on our auxiliary power grid. That's what won us ARDL," Collins said.

As a result, Collins said it gives the airport a "flag" to show its interest in business and industry.

"There's 37 full-time jobs over there that the airport could use as a flag. It makes the airport look more valuable in the eyes of the taxpayer. I used to run around the community and make a power point presentation that said we had 75 jobs on the field and an income of around \$6 million, but we take in around \$300,000 in taxes. That's a 19 percent return on your investment, which really resonates home what an airport can do."

Additionally, Collins points to the operation of SRT Aviation as a commodity that many other regional airports can't boast about.

#### AIRPORT OFFERS FULL-TIME REPAIR STATION

"It's a positive being able to attract a fixed-base operator like SRT Aviation that puts our airport above a lot of others because we have an FAA repair station here. We can work on any size plane from Light Sport Aircraft all the way up to a Boeing business jet. We can handle that," Collins said.

He also pointed out the importance of keeping the airport's restaurant open.

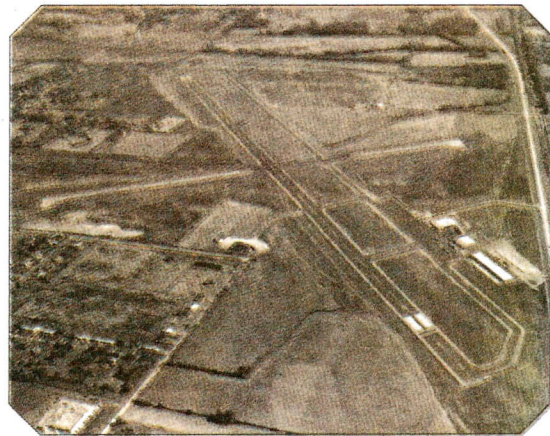
"It's tough to keep the restaurant going here. Everything is moving west in Mt. Vernon. Having that open is tough. We seem to find a way. It's so important to have a restaurant because there are a lot of military ops going across the country and they seek out places that have a restaurant on site so they don't have to take the time to jump in a car, go downtown, and then return to the airport," he said.

The restaurant also plays an important role when special events are held on the airport grounds, such as the Midwest Light Sport Aircraft Expo, the Little Egypt Fly-In, Experimental Aircraft Association Fly-In, Relay for Life and others.

In the meantime, airport officials are content with continuing the current course of action.

"We want to do the same things we're doing now, except doing them ... busier, bringing more people to Mt. Vernon, more industries and we want to see aircraft manufacturing on this airfield," said Collins. "We want the airport to be the showcase for the community as far as luring jobs. If we don't do that, we're just watching airplanes and putting gas in them. We need to be focused on bringing jobs to the community."

rhayes@morningsentinel.com



Submitted Photo

**VIEW FROM THE AIR** — This is what the Mt. Vernon Airport looked like from an airplane in 1970 with the main north and south runway (No. 5) providing pilots with plenty of room to land. Illinois Route 15 is at the far right.



Sentinel Photo

**TERMINAL BUILDING** — This is the main administration building of the Mt. Vernon Airport Authority today. The Kozlarski Terminal was constructed in 1976. In addition to the administrative offices, it is the location of the Grandma's Landing restaurant.