

Airgo still taking flight through pandemic

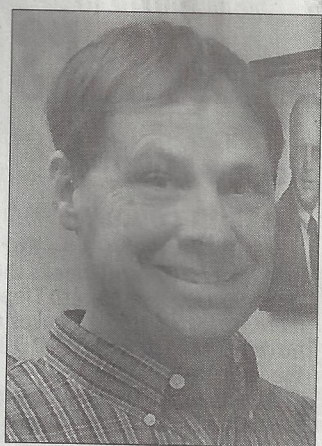
Academy official said students are sheltering downtown when not training

BY BRIAN ROBBINS
SENTINEL NEWS STAFF

CENTRALIA — An Airgo International Flight Academy official said Wednesday that the spread of COVID-19 hasn't dramatically impacted their business and that classes are still ongoing at the school. Airgo, based in Centralia, offers

"We're very proud of what Airgo does and they contribute a lot economically to not just the two airports but also for the communities. I'm not sure that word is out a lot."

CHRIS COLLINS
MOUNT VERNON
OUTLAND AIRPORT DIRECTOR



aviation training for primarily Chinese students, with courses lasting around 14 months. After graduating, students will then return to China and begin working with China Southern Airlines.

Norman Wolfe, vice president and general manager of operations at Airgo International Flight Academy, said COVID-19 hasn't postponed any of the classes, and still expects the current class to graduate on schedule.

"Our current class of students haven't graduated yet, it takes them 14 months to graduate," Wolfe said. "We've got a couple of students who have graduated but they're still here because there's no flights outside the U.S. or inside the U.S. and that's where we're sitting right now."

Health officials across the world recommend that people practice social distancing such as remaining six feet apart from one another in order to avoid spreading the virus.

But for Airgo's current class, which has roughly 80 trainees enrolled, students are never in close proximity to one another during their training, according to Wolfe.

"They (might be) flying by themselves, depending on what stage they're in, otherwise it's an instructor and a student. The maximum is two (people at a time)," he said. "For one thing, the students aren't even out here. Between instructors and students, at any given time, there's no more than 10 people in this building. So when one group is finished flying, we send them back to the hotel and the next group comes out."

Wolfe added that since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, students are required to stay in their rooms at a former hotel downtown.

"In other words, you won't see a Chinese student walking around town," he said.

Airgo students train at the Centralia Municipal Airport, in addition to hav-

ing advanced classes at the Mount Vernon Outland Airport when the trainees are further along in their training.



Kala Lambert

Mount Vernon Outland Airport Director Chris Collins, said their airport used to host more classes for Airgo but due to the lack of certified instructors in the area, it hasn't been used as a main training facility since mid-2019.

"The satellite (training) that we have is high-performance classes year-round. It has been for four to five years now," Collins said. "In 2018, the satellite was at full-strength where they were also doing what I would call their primary training and in multi-engine training, which is the same thing that they do in Centralia. You had them going in concert at both airports."

Although COVID-19 hasn't significantly impacted Airgo's training program, Collins said the virus has had serious consequences for the Mount Vernon airport, with less flights coming in and out, and nearly a 75 percent decrease in fuel sales.

According to Collins, before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, they were averaging two to three flights a day at the airport but now, he can "count the total number of flights with just a hand-and-a-half."

Collins said even though COVID-19 has impacted the airline industry, he believed having Airgo students staying in the surrounding area made a significant economic impact for Mount Vernon and Centralia.

"We're very proud of what Airgo does and they contribute a lot economically to not just the two airports but also for the communities. I'm not sure that word is out a lot," he said. "When they had students living here in Mount Vernon they were shopping, working out at our fitness centers and eating at our restaurants and that's a big impact for both communities."

Kala Lambert, assistant city manager for the City of Centralia, echoed Collins and said Airgo is an important business for Centralia as well.

"Airgo is a part of our community and spends resources for day-to-day living needs in our area and we receive the benefit for that," Lambert said. "Not only from the students that are here, we also have the instructors and their payroll is spent in our region. Airgo's operation here has a great economic impact on the community." 4-30-20
brobbins@morningsentinel.com