

300-foot Iowa City Airport mural to recognize airport contributions

The open call for artists to paint a 300-foot mural at the Iowa City Airport closed on Nov. 14, and the airport will select an artist whose design recognizes the airport's contributions to the community and brighten Iowa City's southernmost entrance.

Stella Shipman, Arts Reporter

The Iowa City Municipal Airport will add a vibrant stretch of bright artwork that shows the city's history of aviation and the contributions of the airport.

The Iowa City Airport Commission and the Iowa City Public Art Advisory Committee sent out an open call to artists in October to design and paint a 12-foot tall, 300-foot-long mural for the side of the aircraft hangar facing South Riverside Drive — the southernmost entrance to Iowa City.

The open call to artists closed on Nov. 14, and the Airport Commission is now in the process of selecting an artist and design.



Matthew Kennedy

The hangars, on one of which where the mural will be painted, on Wednesday, Nov. 16, 2022, at the Iowa City Airport.

This is the first mural project that the airport has ever pursued, but it is only one of many ways that the Iowa City Airport has engaged and formed connections with the public.

Aside from the mural, the Iowa City Airport organized movie viewings in which the public can picnic outside and watch films on viewing platforms or watch the takeoffs and landings of planes. In addition, the airport hosted events like the Young Eagles Flight Program pancake breakfasts.

"The Airport Commission is always trying to find ways to better connect with the community, to find things that can help bring the community out to the airport," Iowa City Airport Manager Michael Tharp said. "The airport is one of those entities that, unless you're directly using it, it's one of those things that exists but most people probably don't have a reason to interact with it."

Tharp said it is important to increase interaction with the community because of the airport's impressive and unique history.

"The story of the history of the Iowa City Airport in that it started where it is now, but at the time it was a few acres on somebody else's dairy farm and it grew from that to much more of the airfield that it is today, with several really prominent points of history in between," Wendy Ford, economic development coordinator and staff contact for the Iowa City Public Art Advisory Committee, said.

The Iowa City Airport, also nicknamed 'Smith Field' in honor of an early airmail pilot killed in a plane wreck, is the oldest civil airport west of the Mississippi River still in its original location. In 1920, it became the only stop during the first airmail flight from Chicago to Omaha.

In 1927, the first commercial flight into Iowa City occurred. Later that year, the airport became a major aerial crossroads under contract with Boeing Air Transport.

The Iowa City Airport Commission is looking for a mural that recognizes this rich history and incorporates it into the artwork. Not only will this mural tell the story of the airport, but it will also be an eye-catching welcome to anyone driving into Iowa City or anyone living nearby.

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"I'm in one of the neighborhoods that is right near it and so I have a perspective from neighborhoods in the vicinity, and I think that helps when we look at things," Iowa City Airport Commission Chair Judy Pfohl said.

The idea for a mural on the hangar had been considered but not implemented until this year when the Public Art Advisory Committee allotted \$8,000 from the city's art budget to the mural project. The overall budget for the mural is \$38,000, most of which the airport is expecting to acquire through fundraising.

Tharp said the mural will recognize the contributions that the Iowa City Airport has made to the community as a significant economic agent.

According to an Iowa Department of Transportation Aviation Economic Impact Study conducted in the beginning of November, the Iowa City Municipal Airport makes \$24 million annually, money that helps support jobs in the area, and generates millions in tax revenue.

"[The mural] not only helps out with the airport and connects us to the community, but it also fosters those relationships with other people in the city," Tharp said.