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Dubuque Regional Airport history

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In the 92-year history of the Dubuque Airport, many milestones have happened. Here's a look at some of them as provided by the Dubuque Historical Society. For more details, visit: encyclopediadubuque.org/index.php?title=AIRPORT.

1928-1930s

1928: Dubuque's first airport opened on May 20, at Nutwood Park, north of the city.

William McBoyle, president of the Dubuque-based Iowa Airport Co. was granted a five-year lease.

He wanted to establish "flying fields" the buying and selling of airplanes, the transportation of passengers and aerial photography and advertising.

Swampland at the south end of the field had to be filled and high lines to the north had to be removed.

A 1,320-foot sod runway was established, hills surrounding the airport on the east and west made it difficult for pilots to safely use the airstrip as all landings had to be attempted from the north or south regardless of wind.

Pilots avoided the airport because of lack of upkeep and service as the grounds weren't mowed and snow wasn't removed. Three years remained on the property lease on the property which was surrendered to the Dubuque Chamber of Commerce which paid a financial settlement.

1930: Twelve flying enthusiasts of Dubuque Airways were awarded the second lease and operated the airport until 1934.

In their first year 42 Dubuque residents soloed at the fields, 2,333 took sightseeing tours and 65 went on cross-country trips.

1933: The Dubuque City Council purchased 162 acres of wooded property on City Island (formerly known as Ham's Island) for \$10,000.

The city's first municipal airport opened at City Island.

Two runways were constructed after extensive grading, each were 2,600 feet long and 100 feet wide.

Accommodations at the airport were lacking. Planes had to be tied down at night as there were no hangars or gas tanks.

The metal hangar from Nutwood Park was later dismantled and rebuilt at the new site. Within a year, a new hangar with an office was constructed. Electricity was supplied by a portable gas-powered generator. There were "His" and "Her" outhouses.

Each spring because of floods the planes had to be flown to high ground in Waterloo, Iowa or Galena.

1934: The air field at Nutwood Park was abandoned

1938: Sixty-four days of business at the City Island airport were lost due to flooding.

1939: The airport flooded from March 31 until April 17. It was submerged again on April 28.

T.E. Flaherty, from the Civil Aeronautics Administration visited the airport to determine if a solution to the flooding was possible. Dubuque was a likely candidate to be placed on the Chicago-Cheyenne, Wyoming airmail and passenger route through Dubuque, Mason City and Sioux City.

Flaherty told city officials that other cities were quickly building suitable sites for airports as they realized that being left off of a route could doom a city's development. As he flew around the Dubuque area in an airplane owned by the Telegraph Herald, Flaherty stated that the elimination of obstacles to landing was essential and long runways were needed. He recommended that the city consider building an airport outside of the city as travel time was cut with automobiles.

1940s

1940: With the start of the Civilian Pilots Training Program in January, flying instruction began at the City Island location.

1941-1942: When the U.S. entered World War II, operations at the airport were temporarily halted and city police were assigned to guard the site.

The Navy rejected the city's inadequate airport for training which led the Chamber of Commerce to conduct a survey as a first step in establishing a first-class airport in Dubuque.

1944: 440 acres were purchased off U.S. 61 for \$130,000. To construct the plateau for the new airport on hilly ground an estimated four million cubic yards of earth had to be moved.

1948: The Dubuque Municipal Airport began operations at its present-day location.

The City Island site was decommissioned.

1949: The first terminal building was constructed.

1950s

1950: Dubuque residents voted via referendum to form an independent airport commission.

1951-1952: Facilities were developed and expanded.

1955: Commercial service became available with Ozark Air Lines providing passenger flights.

1960s

1968: Dubuque City Council voted to issue \$490,000 in bonds for the construction of a new terminal building.

1969: Dedicated in November, the new airport was four times the size of the original was expected to serve the community needs for 25 years.

1970s 1971: Mississippi Valley Airlines began service to Dubuque.

1973: Construction at the airport included a new air traffic control tower.

1978: Parking meters were installed.

1980s

1983-1984: Two new hangars were constructed for its new fixed-base operator, Crescent Aviation

1984: A new hangar and offices were constructed for American Central Airlines.

The FAA grounded American Central for safety violations in December.

1985: American Central filed for bankruptcy and ceased operations in July, leaving the city with payments on a \$750,000 complex.

Mississippi Valley Airlines purchased and continued Dubuque service under the name United Express until September 1987.

Iowa Airways began service to Iowa and added service to Chicago-Midway.

1987: Midwest Aviation began service to Minneapolis; Great Lakes Airlines began service to O'Hare.

1988: The name of the airport was changed from the Dubuque Municipal Airport to the Dubuque Regional Airport on Sept. 6.

The terminal was remodeled for the first time.

Simmons Airlines American Eagle replaced Air Wisconsin as the link to Chicago-O'Hare

1990s

1992: The Dubuque airport received \$945,000 to fund a master plan and the construction of a facility to house the aircraft rescue and firefighting equipment and personnel, airport maintenance crews and storage of equipment and supplies. The city of Dubuque provided a ten percent match to the FAA grant.

1993: Dubuque Regional Airport Commission members complimented Crescent Aviation for providing fixed base operator services including fuel for airplanes and maintaining private planes for nine years. The council then voted to turn the duties over to the city. The change was expected to save costs.

City assumed control of the fueling and hangaring services, saving taxpayers an estimated \$280,000 in four years.

1995: The airport commissioned a study which found that 48% of Dubuque travelers flew from out-of-town airports with nearly 25 percent of these using Chicago's O'Hare International Airport. Stopping that "leakage" meant working with airlines to keep fares as low as possible and attempting to attract a third carrier into Dubuque. The Department of Transportation awarded the slots to Great Lakes Aviation, parent company of United Express Airlines.

1997: Dubuque was served by American Eagle, Northwest AirLink and United Express airlines.

The Dubuque Regional Airport received the FAA "Airport Safety Enhancement Award" many times. The airport held the nation's record with six consecutive years of perfect safety regulation compliance-two years ahead of any other city.

2000s

2007: City of Dubuque announced its intention to construct a larger terminal building, no time line was given for the completion of the project.

2011: Site work on the new terminal began. The planned \$39 million, 33,000 square-foot terminal tripled the space of the existing facility with a design that allowed for future expansion. Parking amenities and airplane taxi spaces were also increased.

2013: The building structure of the new Dubuque Regional Airport terminal was completed in October, interior work remained.

2015: There were 51,172 FAA-sanctioned operations at the Dubuque Regional Airport making it the second-busiest airport in Iowa.

2016: The new airport terminal opened in May, six months ahead of schedule and \$3 million under budget.

The 35,615-square-foot terminal cost \$37 million with about 85 percent paid for by the FAA. The rest came from the City of Dubuque, airport revenues and grants.

2017: In the first five months, the airport had about 1,170 additional passengers boarding flights out of Dubuque compared to the same period in 2016.

According to airport statistics, passenger numbers have steadily increased since 2013. This was attributed to more seating being made available by American Airlines, free airport terminal parking and an improved terminal environment.

2019: City officials announced that the FAA had approved \$537,237 for the airport through the Airport Improvement Program. The money, in addition to a \$55,000 local match, would be used to update the airport's master plan. The update would be in line with the typical completion of such a review every 12 to 15 years. The last update was completed in 2004.

A new study indicated that even after an investment of \$37 million in a new commercial airline terminal, the Dubuque Regional Airport would need more room and facilities over the next two decades.

While the FAA projected growth in private business flights and jet usage, the airport had run out of hangar space.

Anticipated growth in the University of Dubuque's aviation program was also expected to create pressure. The university planned to add six aircraft by the end of 2020 which put the airport's based aircraft count at 84.

Studies indicated that 77 percent of all potential passengers with a 50-70 mile radius of Dubuque chose to fly from other airports. The Dubuque airport lacked multiple airline options, varied direct/nonstop destinations and more frequent daily departures. As airlines replaced 50-seat regional jets with more fuel-efficient 70-90 seat jets, the current airport could have problems handling the traffic. A consulting firm was expected to present a master plan concept, environmental review, and financial plan to the city council.

2020: Despite showing a steady increase in the number of passengers taking three daily flights from Dubuque to Chicago's O'Hare Airport and returning, it was not enough to convince American Airlines to add another flight.

A plan involved community partners guaranteeing a certain amount of revenue to an airline if it agreed to provide service here was developed. If the revenue of the airline fell below the guarantee, the community would use part of its established fund to pay the airline the difference up to the guaranteed amount.

Establishing the fund was the first order of business and was addressed by the federal grant of \$775,000 that was received in February.

Combined with money raised locally by the airport and the Dubuque Area Chamber of Commerce the emergency fund stood at \$1.3 million to be used to attract a carrier offering twice daily flights to Denver.

These were pre-pandemic plans, which could be subject to change.

