

Iowa City airport celebrates 100 years

Staff planning events for June 8-10 anniversary while envisioning future

IOWA CITY — As World War I was coming to an end and the United States was shifting its focus on aviation from warfare to peacetime uses, Iowa City flew into the airport business with its new facility.

In 1918, the Iowa City Municipal Airport opened its doors as a stop for airmail planes. Fast forward to today, and the general aviation airport is completing about 36,000 operations per year, which includes both takeoffs and landings, all while planning a centennial celebration.

“Commercial aviation in Iowa was basically born here with the airmail route,” said Michael Tharp, airport operations specialist. The Midwest route for airmail would typically go from Omaha to Chicago with a stop in Iowa City, he said.

Now, the airport is a general aviation facility, which Tharp said typically means any airport that doesn’t serve military or commercial airline flights.

As aviation use in the country grew, the airport added passenger service, which lasted up until the 1970s, Tharp said. The airport mostly serves flights such as business charters, medical transports and crop-dusting planes.

The airport is home to 92 different aircraft as well as the University of Iowa’s Operator Performance Laboratory for aviation research.

“Even if you can’t see the whole aspects of aviation, there are so many ways aviation touches a community,” Tharp said. “We’re ... still serving a pretty healthy general aviation community.”

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As part of the 100-year anniversary celebration, airport staff are planning events for June 8-10. While the exact details are still yet to be determined, Tharp said he wanted activities that touch on the different eras in aviation history, as well as features that explain what the future of aviation could be during the next 100 years.

“One hundred years, we obviously want to mark that. It’s not only important to the airport, we think it’s a pretty important event to the community,” Tharp said.

Tharp said he hopes the events help to get the next generation interested in aviation. He said the already-existing Young Eagles program to give children free plane rides every year already helps do that.

Tharp said that airport staff also hope to upgrade the public viewing area of the airport to a more parklike atmosphere to make it a destination for activities such as family picnics.

“That’s the whole purpose, is get them at least exposed to aviation, talk a little bit about what aviation can do, how they can get more involved,” Tharp said. “It’s one of those things where if you’re not directly involved in it, sometimes it’s hard to see the benefits.”

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