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Willenborg airport career takes flight

By LARRY DEVINE
News Editor

Manning native Chris Willenborg - hooked on aviation since he was a young boy flying with his dad and an uncle - has achieved a new personal high with that interest, recently becoming manager and fixed base operator at Denison Municipal Airport.

The 26-year-old Willenborg is in charge of operations at the airport, including runway, apron and grounds maintenance, as well as fueling planes.

The Denison airport has five hangars and a shop hangar and currently has about a dozen planes on the grounds.

The airport, located southwest of town, has a nearly mile-long and 75-foot wide southeast-northwest main runway and two grass crosswind runways. Plans are in the works for constructing a concrete, north-south, crosswind runway to improve safety.

Willenborg is a son of Ron and Charlotte Willenborg. His dad is a cattle producer and raises corn and soybeans south of Manning, and his mom is youth director at St. Michael Catholic Church in Harlan.

Chris, who has three older sisters - Dawn of Kansas City, Kan., Michelle of Charlotte, Iowa, and Jill of Hastings, Iowa - graduated in 2005 from Manning High School, where he was a National Honor Society member and senior class president.

He received a bachelor's degree in business administration, majoring in marketing, in 2009 at Loyola University in Chicago, Ill.



Chris Willenborg, a 2005 Manning High School graduate and son of Ron and Charlotte Willenborg, recently became manager and fixed base operator at Denison Airport.

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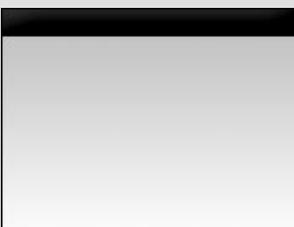
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He studied aerospace engineering for a year at Iowa State University and then worked for Elliott Aviation at Des Moines International Airport before the Denison position opened, as previous manager Tim Kirk decided to pursue a commercial pilot's license. At Elliott Aviation, Willenborg's duties included building and grounds maintenance and fueling planes, similar to his duties at Denison.

And Willenborg already was very familiar with the Denison airport. His dad has rented a hangar there for his Cessna 150 and 172 planes. While at Manning High School, Willenborg did his Eagle Scout project at the airport, landscaping around the terminal building. Today the terminal consists of a front desk, conference room, offices, pilots' lounge with TV and sofa, vending machines and rest rooms.

Willenborg received his private-pilot's license at Denison, taking lessons from former manager Barry Reid, also from Manning and now airport manager at Atlantic.

Willenborg received his private-pilot's license in 2008 when he was 22 and recently completed additional training to earn his instrument rating. He aims to soon receive a commercial license so that he can provide pilot instruction.

"It's something I've been interested in since I was a kid," Willenborg says of flying.

He recalls taking his first plane ride with his uncle George Wolf, a manufacturer in Chicago, Ill., in his Beechcraft Bonanza. Chris flew with his dad to flight breakfasts at many airports in the area, such as Carroll, Denison, Atlantic and Harlan.

"I like the freedom of it," Willenborg says of flying. "You're able to travel wherever you want in a short time and enjoy good scenic views."

He says of his goals at Denison, "I'd like to achieve more business here and spark up more aviation interest in the community, hopefully get some more pilots in the area coming into Denison."

Willenborg currently lives in Manning but plans to move to Denison.

Longtime Denison Airport Commission member Dr. Dennis Crabb and Denison city manager Terry Crawford say that as airport manager Willenborg will play a key role in economic strength of the community.

Crawford notes the airport primarily serves air traffic for such major local businesses as Farmland, Tyson, Hy-Vee, Wal-Mart and GOMACO Corp. of Ida Grove.

"One of the main features of our airport is for economic development," Crawford says, "both for our existing businesses and prospective businesses we're trying to recruit."

Crabb and Crawford say Willenborg's application for the position stood out because of his familiarity with the airport, as well as his enthusiasm and work ethic.

"Chris is an energetic, hard-working young man. We're looking forward to him leading our airport effort," Crawford says.

Crabb, who's served on the Airport Commission since 1979, says, "He's a local boy, and we've known him, his family and his work ethic, so we thought he'd be a good fit for us."

Crawford says plans call for adding a mechanic at the airport.

"We feel it's too much for one person to be manager, fixed base operator and mechanic," he says.

A major capital-improvement project will be construction of a concrete crosswind runway. Crawford estimates the project cost at \$2.3 million or more - \$1.3 million for grading and drainage and \$1 million for paving and lighting. With the grounds located on a hilltop, Crawford says, that will require considerable earthwork.

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Crawford says the city will be pursuing Federal Aviation Administration grants that could pay 90 percent of the project cost, but that will require Willenborg to maintain the airport in first-class shape in order to qualify for the funds. The other 10 percent will be locally funded. The city's current airport budget is \$250,000.

For the project, the city recently purchased 30 acres - 22 on the south end and 8 on the north - from three separate landowners.

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