

THE TRIBUNE

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Ames Airport grows as a community asset

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Published: Sunday, June 27, 2010 12:05 PM CDT

Print Page

When planes started landing on the newly repaved runway 13/31 at Ames Municipal Airport earlier this month, there were smiles all around.

Under construction for more than a year, the runway, which runs from southeast to northwest, is used anytime crosswinds prevent pilots from using the longer main runway 19/01.

"That happens fairly often during colder weather," said Jeff Smalley, director of flight operations at Hap's Air Service, the "fixed base operator" that is in charge of running the facility on the city's south side.

Smalley said that while jet aircraft normally use the 5,700-foot main runway, the new runway gives pilots an alternative they haven't had for quite some time.

"Not having that runway in service has been painful, especially in the slower economy," Smalley said. "We rely on air traffic for fuel sale revenue. Many flights have been going to other airports (Ankeny and Des Moines) in the meantime, and it has meant we've had to pinch and stretch our budget.

"Our income for 2009 was 70 percent less than it was the year before."

The new, 3,490-foot runway officially reopened to day-time traffic on June 4.

Runway lights have yet to be finished, and that means night-time flights can't use it, Smalley said.

Scott Williams, an engineer with Ames-based HWS Consulting Group and project manager for the new runway, said that the runway was last resurfaced in 1996-97.

Unlike that project, this one was a complete reconstruction, he said.

Williams said workers removed the pavement, re-graded the land beneath it, added a new rock base, installed storm sewers, replaced the pavement with 4,900 cubic yards of new concrete and installed new lights.

"The lights will be connected after (workers) replace some older equipment that didn't figure in the original project," he said.

Williams said that part of the work should take "several weeks."

Airport averages 38,000 annual takeoffs, landings

Damion Pregitzer, traffic engineer with the city of Ames Public Works Department, said that while the city doesn't count all takeoffs and landings at the airport, a website called www.Flightaware.com does count arrivals and departures, based on the flight plans filed by pilots.



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Photo by Ronnie Miller/The Tribune
Jeff Smalley, left, is the director of flight operations at Hap's Air Service Inc., and Scott Williams is an engineer and office manager for HWS Consulting Group in Ames and the project manager for the new runway at Ames Municipal Airport.

The site's statistics show that from May 10 through June 11, 2010, there were between five and six arrivals/departures at Ames each day.

"You can take those statistics and multiply them by at least three," Smalley said. "Many of the takeoffs and landings here are flying lessons" or other traffic that don't involve flight plans, he said.

Tim McClung, planning and outreach manager for the Iowa Department of Transportation's Office of Aviation, said an Ohio consultant hired by the DOT estimates that Ames Municipal Airport experiences an average of 38,000 "operations" per year.

"Each operation is a takeoff or landing," he said.

Smalley said the airport saw a short upswing in usage when Farm Progress Days made its debut two years ago in nearby Boone. The site rotates between Boone and Decatur, Ill. It will be in Boone again this summer.

"But we are nowhere near what Decatur's airport gets during their show," Smalley said. "I've flown in there during their show, and they get an average of 300 flights per day."

Smalley said he hopes to get a similar response, once pilots spread the word about the local airport.

Ames Municipal Airport has 52 single hangar spaces and eight combination spaces, he said. Some are privately owned, and some are leased to users by the city, Smalley said.

"It would be nice to have two more big hangars," Smalley said. "We could easily lease more space if we had it. We are missing flights that go elsewhere because the owners (of corporations or private parties) want to store their planes out of the weather."

Even with those drawbacks, the airport gets plenty of business use, according to Smalley.

"And many local businesses keep planes here for flights to other destinations," he said. "It is interesting how many flights are connected with big box stores in the community. Corporate officials come here many times to visit the local stores.

"The airport is sometimes seen as a place where rich people keep their toys, but it goes beyond that."

Smalley said Iowa State University makes frequent use of the airport, especially its veterinary school, and the National Centers for Animal Health has routine flights to and from Ames.

New taxiway on drawing board

Pregitzer said runway 13/31 was financed by a pair of FAA grants collectively worth \$2,674,970, according to grant application material.

"The finishing touches are just about done, including grading, seeding and stabilization off the runway, but there are the electrical issues," Pregitzer said.

"Because of the type and age of the existing light system, there are difficulties connecting it to the new runway lights."

The main effort now is to close out the grant and resolve the electrical issues.

Once the runway is finished, the work moves on to an estimated \$1 million taxiway near the main terminal. Williams said the city should have an answer on its FAA grant application for that project later this summer.

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