



AIRPORTS

Mike McCollum

Airport Manager Don French shows how to make a smooth landing.

Airport's now 50 years old and things are looking up

By JUDY BRILL
STAFF WRITER

It's 1:45 p.m. on a Wednesday, and Don French, manager of Watsonville Municipal Airport, is running a little late for an appointment.

He'll be back in a few minutes, assures an office worker at the terminal. "He's in the pattern."

Sure enough, 10 or so minutes later, French, at the controls of his V-Tail Bonanza, cruises in for a landing.

He emerges onto the tarmac, chatting with Carlos Palacios and Edward Mondragon, two city finance employees. They've been up for a business lunch in Hollister to discuss restructuring how the airport handles its accounts.

It's not an atypical day for French, who's been airport manager for about a year. And tomorrow, the airport will celebrate its 50th anniversary. (See other story.)

Nor is it an atypical use of the airport, which, as the only public airport in Santa Cruz County, is currently home base for 308 general aviation craft and a growing number of business jets.

The airport is host to corporate aircraft as well, from Beverly Fabrics, Granite Construction Co., Borland Enterprises and New West Foods, and sees business flights of such local businesses as Seagate, Wrigley's, Watsonville Community Hospital and Airborne Express. Last year, the airport handled more than 130,000 landings and takeoffs.

Since assuming the airport controls, French's routine has required that he change caps daily, from assistant Watsonville fire chief to part-time city manager.

All welcome at celebration

Zoom out to Aviation Way tomorrow to help Watsonville Municipal Airport celebrate its 50th anniversary.

The VFW will get the party off the ground with a flag-raising and a gun salute at 10 a.m. An aerobatics show, vintage airplane display and plane rides will help mark the date, and the mayor of Watsonville and current and former airport managers will be on hand to rededicate the field.

Rides on some aircraft will be available at a cost of 5 cents per pound (of the passenger). Tours
See AIRPORT / back of section ▶

He spends his mornings at the fire station, and says he tries to make it out to the airport at least once a day. The time-share arrangement seems to be working, he says.

"Vern Ackerman was the manager here for 42 years, including his military service," French said. "And for all that time, he was a part-time manager. So when you take a look at the airport, it's had a part-time manager historically. It may not be a real regression to going back to part-time."

French said there are two things that could prompt a change back to a full-time position: if there was a budget increase, or if the level of airport activity were to rise.

For now, French said, with the excellent work of four full-time and two part-time airport staff, everything is getting handled, and, in terms of annual budgeting, the air-

port is in the black.

Up and running at the airport are an improved runway lighting system; a cost-saving, 24-hour self-service fuel island; and a computerized weather station, currently in a testing phase but due to be commissioned on the first of the year. Everything you'd want to know about the weather can be had by calling 724-8794.

Among upcoming projects is final work on the airport's five-year Master Plan, emphasizing safety and expansion. The first draft is expected by the end of the month, French said.

Plans to improve drainage and pursue a potentially money-making clay mining enterprise at the airport have been stalled by the discovery of an abundance of tarplant, an state endangered plant. But French is upbeat about surmounting the obstacle. In fact, he said, they're already looking at possible ways to capitalize on the discovery and Watsonville's newfound status as "Tarplant Capital of the World."

French said photos of the plant have already been taken, "and if they come out, we're putting them on T-shirts."

French is also optimistic about the airport's role in being a good neighbor.

An airport advisory committee is being formed composed of representatives of the airport, pilots, local aviation organizations, the community, the private sector, the city and the county. (French noted that the names of residents interested in representing the county are still being sought.)

With no desire to make light of the many problems inherent in

See FRENCH / back of section ▶

AIRPORTS

NOV 5 1993

▶ From Page 1

of on-ground aircraft will also be given.

Among the planes on display will be the China Doll, a Curtiss-Wright designed C-46 Commando World War II transport. Its large load capacity and excellent high-altitude performance earned it distinction carrying supplies over the "Hump" — the Himalayas, in the Indo-Burma theater of war.

The China Doll, the only C-46 operating on the west coast, is being flown in from Camarillo by the Southern California Wing of the Confederate Air Force, an organization dedicated to the preservation and operation of historic World War II aircraft.

A \$1 donation to tour the plane will be asked. The Confederate Air Force also will sell souvenirs and memorabilia.

Other exhibits will be a DC-3, a twin-engine aircraft, one of the early successful commercial passenger airliners; a Lockheed/Howard 250; an F8 Bearcat Navy fighter, the last piston-engine carrier fighter manufactured by Grumman; and a P-51 Mustang fighter.

Food and refreshments will be available.

For more information, call Sharon Reeder, airport operations supervisor, at 728-6075.

—Judy Brill

FRENCH

▶ From Page 1

running an airport, French said that Saturday's celebration should be just that. "This is a happy birthday," he said.

"Most of the people here are pretty happy," French said. "In reality, the philosophy of the airport has changed from a very structured, bureaucratic format to one of common interests."

Pointing to a group of overtly happy pilots who had just emerged from Zuniga's restaurant, French said, "Take these guys here ... we listen to them. We don't always give them what they say, but we really want input."

"Most of the pilots have a mutual interest in (wanting) to make the airport a viable part of the community," French said.

