

JET SET FINDS A HOME IN WATSONVILLE



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel photos

A Cessna Citation 1 lands Friday at Watsonville Airport, where officials say sales of jet fuel have doubled in the last six years.

Jet traffic increases in Watsonville

Strong economy boosts business at city airport

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WATSONVILLE — The jet set is coming to Watsonville.

Reflecting the Bay Area's strong economy, business flights in and out of the Watsonville Municipal Airport are on the rise, airport officials and pilots say.

Jets from Nike, Georgia-Pacific, Rite-Aid, Warner Bros., Union-Pacific, Dole, Anheuser-Busch and Albertson's are some of the recent arrivals at the airport.

"They're coming from everywhere," airport manager Don French said.

The ease of getting in and out of the airport tops the list of amenities that attract big business, according to Sharon Reeder, airport operations supervisor.

Unlike airports with regularly scheduled flights and air traffic control towers, the Watsonville airport, which lies on the city's north side, allows pilots to come and go as they please.

The airport is busiest on the weekends with recreational pilots, but French said it's typical for two to five corporate jets to arrive during the week.

Please see **JET SET** on **BACK PAGE**



Most flights into Watsonville originate elsewhere, officials say, but jet and propeller-plane charter businesses based here have increased from one to four.

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Jet set

Continued from Page A1

"I believe we've almost doubled our sales of jet fuel in the past six years," he said. "When the economy is good, aviation is good. They go hand in hand. ... My gut feeling is high-tech is part of it."

Since takeoffs and landings aren't tracked, no one knows just how many more jets are touching down in Watsonville.

But jet fuel sales are one of the best indicators of increased flight activity since the airport does not operate an air traffic control tower.

In 1999, the airport sold 63,000 gallons of fuel. This year 118,000 gallons were sold.

"Watsonville being a dink town gets a fair amount of corporate stuff," said Bill Cleverdon, former owner of Watsonville's United Flight Service flying school.

"I think because Silicon Valley went bonkers, we're getting a lot more."

Cleverdon, who has been working at the airport since 1973, remembers when there were only 95 planes based at the airport. Now there are about 350.

And they're not crop-dusters. Cleverdon marvels as multimillion-dollar



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

The boom in high-tech industries has increased jet traffic in Watsonville.

corporate jets whisk in and out of the airport daily.

Airport officials plan to survey incoming business passengers to get a full picture of where they are coming from and why they are using the airport.

There are 12 resident jets at the airport. Starfish Software owner Philippe Kahn just purchased a new Cessna Citation jet that he parks at the airport. Granite Construction, Beverly

Fabrics and Borland also maintain jets at the airport.

Up and away

Single-engine flights are also on the rise, French said. Most flights into Watsonville originate out of the area, but there is an increase in locally based business charter services, jet and nonjet.

Five years ago there was one charter service at the airport; now there

are four, French said.

"In the three years I've been at the Watsonville airport I'm sure (business) has doubled," said John Hickey, director of operations for Watsonville Executive Charter.

Hickey ferries berry growers and professionals throughout the state, especially to the Oxnard and Santa Maria strawberry growing regions and the Central Valley.

A flight costs from \$700 to \$1,400, split among the passengers, he said.

While traffic is reaching new heights, the airport is not without its critics.

It has long figured in land-use debates in Watsonville.

The Campaign to Save Pajaro Valley's Airport Study Committee has long argued the airport is a luxury the city cannot afford. The group says the land would be better used for housing.

Critics of plans to build a high school west of Highway 1 say the proximity of the airport puts students at risk.

The increase in business flight activity boosts airport advocates' claims that the facility is an economic asset to the city.

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