

What's up at the airport?

Council reviews new improvement, plans

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Recent and future improvements were the focus of a tour of the Watsonville Municipal Airport by the City Council yesterday.

The tour was led by Assistant Fire Chief Don French, who is also acting as the airport manager.

The airport has been the focus of much discussion for the past few years, with critics questioning the benefits it provides to the city and complaining about noise and safety, and supporters saying it plays a vital role in the local economy. Several years ago housing advocates proposed closing the airport and using the land for housing, parks and schools. That suggestion was rejected by the council.

Since then, however, the city has focused more closely on how the airport is run. Several changes have been made over the last year to insure that it is a self-supporting operation.

French pointed out some of those yesterday. A recently installed self-fueling station is generating new revenues for the city, he said. In the past, fuel had been pumped out of fuel trucks city employees drove up to the airplanes, and was only available when staffers were around.

Now, on some days, French said, fuel sales are twice as high as they had been, and the number of airport staff has been reduced. French did not have

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exact figures of the revenues generated by the fuel sales, but said the airport operation will be able to pay the city's General Fund money it owes from previous years and have some left over to be used for other improvements.

Other recent changes at the airport have included the installation of a weather collection gizmo that makes current temperature, visibility, wind and other conditions at the airport available to pilots and others. The information, which is continually updated, is available by calling 724-8794. The system was set up by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association, which will soon put the weather information on a radio channel pilots can tune into.

Part of the lobby has been converted into a pilot's lounge — the airport lacked one — and a direct dial phone in the lobby connects callers directly to motels, cab companies, car rental agencies and other services at no charge. Other improvements include the installation of "blue rooms," otherwise known as portable toilets, outside of sev-

eral of the hangars. The only bathroom available to pilots previously was in the terminal building, which was locked at night.

After a four- or five-hour flight, French said, the "blue room" is greatly appreciated.

The council was given a short tour of the airport and its environs in a plane flown by Dick Sleeper of Beverly Fabrics, a 30-store chain of fabric stores. Sleeper's company has its headquarters in Watsonville and flies executives in and out of the airport two or three times a week.

French pointed to Sleeper's company as an example of businesses who wouldn't be here if they didn't have access to the airport. In fact, French said, he knows many more businesses that would locate here if the airport improved its landing system to make it easier to land in foggy weather.

An airport master plan, which has been in the works for some time, is being worked on by a consultant. City Manager Steve Salomon said he expected the plan, which would make proposals for the future development

of the airport, to be released in the next three to four months.

After the short plane ride, council members boarded a city bus and drove around the airport, while French pointed out some of the undeveloped areas where additional hangars and businesses might be put.

"Executive" hangars — slightly bigger and more expensive to rent — are being considered for one end of the airport, near the Watsonville Air Center. Other, regular-sized hangars could be placed alongside the current ones to the right of the terminal building. The demand for hangars is great: There are 155 names on a waiting list, and the wait is about 12 years.

The city also rents tie-down spaces, many of which are not being used. French said the tie-downs could be consolidated to make room for additional hangars. Hangars are relatively inexpensive to build, and the rents generate money for the city.

Salomon said the area behind some of the buildings on Airport Boulevard and in front of some of the existing hangars could also be developed for more businesses. French said the airport is desperately in need of a good pilot shop, a place where pilots could purchase gear and accessories.

Another, simpler improvement the city is planning is pulling back the fence along the parking lot near Zuniga's restaurant to create 15 more spaces.

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Mike McCollum

Mayor Oscar Rios makes a comic exit from plane after aerial tour of Watsonville Municipal Airport.