

Airport faces up to problems, potential

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In the 50 years since the city took possession of the land for the Watsonville airport, the site has definitely seen its share of ups and downs.

The news last month that one of the airport's tenants, Barbary Coast Airways Inc., closed its doors owing the city of Watsonville \$22,000 in rent is only the latest in a series of problems that have plagued the airport in recent years.

Many of the businesses that rent space from the city in airport buildings and hangars are barely hanging on. Following Barbary Coast, Pegasus Pilot Shop went out of business last month. And many of the small companies have only been in business a few years.

City officials say the overall economy affects aviation as much as any other industry, and concede that the recession has taken its toll.

As people have increasingly brought suit against airline manufacturers and pilots for accidents, insurance and liability costs have skyrocketed — to the point where many manufacturers have stopped making small planes and many pilots have stopped flying, according to industry observers.

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Airport tenant

But beyond those kinds of global problems, pilots, mechanics and other business people at the airport charge the city and airport management with keeping what could be a thriving business grounded.

"They have an absolute gold mine here and they just don't know it," said one airport tenant. "If they'd just get off their duffs and get someone out here who gives a hang..."

Airport Manager Kimberly Wirht is at the center of a storm of complaints from the people who spend their weeks or their weekends — or both — at the airport. Many of them charge that she is too remote from the day to day workings of the industry to be an effective administrator.

"I think they need a working airport manager," said one pilot who didn't want his name used.

"They need an airport manager who shows up in Levi's and rolls her sleeves up."

Assistant City Manager Gary Smith said it's easy to criticize, but much more difficult to tackle complicated problems.

"I have no doubt that we can definitely improve on the amount of revenue we collect on the airport," he said. "In the last couple of years, we've been busy. But it hasn't been easy to make major changes."

Smith also said he has had conversations with Wirht about the complaints he's received regarding her management. "We're dealing with it," he said.

Specifically, there are a number of thorny issues that still have many aviators smarting.

There are currently about 160 people on a waiting list for renting

an airport hangar. They include weekend hobby pilots as well as businesses that want an indoor space to park their planes.

In the past year, according to Smith, two hangars have become available. So why doesn't the city build more?

"We have targeted some areas to build hangars," Smith said. "We're working on that."

The airport's Master Plan for the next five years is still in the works, Smith said. If decisions about airport improvements are made outside of an overall plan, mistakes might be made, he said. Smith estimated that the plan should be ready to go before the City Council within six months.

Another set of gripes has to do with the city's fuel sales at the airport. Pilots say the hours are too restricted and they sometimes have to wait 45 minutes to get serviced.

Smith said the city is getting ready to install a self-service island that will allow pilots to fill up their tanks themselves.

Airport Manager Wirht said in the four and a half years that she has been in charge, a lot has been accomplished — despite major roadblocks like the earthquake. The 25-year-old runway lighting was replaced, a weather observer

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station is due to be constructed this fall, and the airport office management was reorganized.

"There's been plenty that has happened," she said. "When I hear people say nothing's happening, my question is, where have they been?"

Wirht echoed Smith when she said that projects like the self-service fuel island and the additional hangars take preparation.

"Everybody says, let's build it, let's get it done. And nobody wants to do any planning," she said.

As to the charges that she is too remote, Wirht agreed that she could do a better job of keeping in touch with the airport tenants and other users.

"It's a very, very busy place," she said. "There's eight hours in a day."

The general consensus in the aviation community is that the

Watsonville airport will see better days ahead.

Thomas Gustafsson was the lead flight instructor for Barbary Coast before it went out of business. He and several other former employees got together within weeks after they found themselves without jobs and formed the Santa Cruz Flying Club, a non-profit organization that offers flight training on a pay-as-you-go basis. The club is now renting a new office at the airport and Gustafsson is optimistic about the future.

"I think the economy is about to turn around," he said.

That won't exempt the city from its responsibilities, however.

Said one pilot: "If the city can provide better service ... people would fly in a lot more, but you have to show that you want them here."

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