

50 years of flight

AIR ports



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Watsonville Municipal Airport is no longer subsidized financially by the city of Watsonville.

Watsonville Airport runs on an air of uncertainty

By MARIANNE BIASOTTI
Sentinel staff writer

SINCE WORLD WAR II, when the Watsonville Municipal Airport was a Naval air station, a large T has marked the city from the air.

On the ground, however, the airport's crossed airstrips denote the clash of two interests: airport backers who say the facility plays an important role in the community and detractors who describe it as a nuisance, a waste of valuable land and a playground for the wealthy.

The city's Municipal Airport celebrates its 50th anniversary today, and it's been a turbulent ride.

In 1989, the airport served as a lifeline to the community when the Loma Prieta earthquake devastated much of the county and cut off roads. Planes carried food and supplies to thousands of local residents in the weeks following the disaster.

But the '90s haven't been as kind to the airport, the only such commercial venture in the county since Scotts Valley Airport closed in 1983.

Watsonville's airport has endured financial difficulties, threats to build housing on its tarmac, steady complaints about plane noise, charges of elitism and, most recently, a restructuring that city officials hope will send the facility flying on its own.

"Because of restructuring, the airport is self-sufficient, and will allow us to improve the facilities not only for the airport, but for the entire community," said Airport Manager Don French, who took over last year.

For years, the airport had paid nothing



Courtesy of Watsonville Airport

The airport's original control tower at an undetermined date.

for city-provided legal, planning, and business services at no cost, even though it generated its own revenues.

In 1991, the City Council voted to start charging the airport \$126,000 a year for those services. About \$120,000 is outstanding from the first year city services were charged, and should be paid off this year, French said. That sum is included in this year's \$13.1 million budget.

But the airport was set back financially in 1991 when an employee's head injury ran up \$250,000 in worker's compensation costs. Payments are being made in increments.

"If that had not occurred, they'd be very close to breaking even now," said Eric Frost, city finance director.

The city's decision to stop subsidizing the airport followed the release of a 1991 report that concluded "operations and conditions at the airport are in a constant state of change and difficult to pin down."

The report included a 1990 bid by community activists to transform its runways and hangars into streets and housing.

The Watsonville Housing Action Committee, headed by Watsonville resident Frank Bardacke, argued the 290-acre city-owned airport should benefit a greater segment of the population.

Bardacke and others suggested it be converted into "Watsonville Airport Gardens." By selling part of the land for schools and businesses, the city could partially subsidize a low-income community with 1,500 housing units, two schools, a park and large plaza, the proposal said.

After five hours of sometimes vociferous public testimony, City Council members voted unanimously to keep the city airport.

It was a wake-up call for what then-Mayor Todd McFarren described as an airport that had been "asleep for the last 20 years."

"There's more pressure than ever for the airport to provide its economic potential — land is scarce in the valley," said Vice Mayor Lowell Hurst.

Last year, the city downsized airport staff from seven to four, and replaced a full-time manager with a part-time position filled by French, who is also an assis-

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tant fire chief.

French presided over airport belt-tightening, and helped improve its profitability and service to pilots by adding a 24-hour self-serve fuel pump. Fuel sales generated \$700,000 in 1992, about half the airport's revenues, and are expected to climb. Other revenues are generated by hangar rents, flight schools, mechanics, aircraft sales and a restaurant.

Next year the airport should break even, said French.

"By being our own entity, it's going to be a lot more efficient" because operations will be centralized at the airport, French said.

To really fly on its own, the airport also will build reserves to pay for unexpected expenses. Until now, the city advanced the airport money that was paid back at the end of the year.

"The airport is for the community, and we want to show it's a real asset to the community, not a drain," said French.

The city is backing that effort. Last month, the council dedicated \$55,000 toward the design of 53 new hangars, expected to be built next year. French plans to pay back the money from a \$1 million private loan for hangar construction. The council also voted to increase hangar rental fees by \$10 a month. Rents are between \$130 and \$160 a month, comparable or lower than rents at nearby airports like Salinas, where rents are between \$85 and \$180, and San Jose's Reid Hillview, which charges between \$157 and \$255.

The airport's annual Antique Fly-In, held the last weekend in May, features vintage planes from throughout the country and draws thousands of spectators, boosting area tourism.

But despite city efforts to make the airport more profitable, critics continue to clip at its wings.

"People want to see the airport provide jobs and an economic stimulus, which I think the airport has the potential to provide," said Hurst, whose district includes the airport. "But it hasn't happened to the degree to which we'd like to see it."

While the Airport Gardens proposal is grounded, Bardacke said, he and others said the notion of converting the airport to housing

warrants a second look.

As the city's planners target farmland, wetlands and rural neighborhoods outside Watsonville for future growth, support for housing on airport land is growing among environmental and housing-action groups, said Bardacke.

"We're not just talking about any piece of property here, we're talking about property available in a city where there is a land crisis," Bardacke said.

Nearly 30 percent of city residents share housing in crowded conditions; an additional 2,600 housing units are needed just to provide housing for the city's present population of 32,000. But those who view the airport as a good site for city expansion fear it carries too much political weight.

"God, motherhood, apple pie and the airport: these are in the don't-criticize, don't-touch, don't-alter category," said Watsonville Wetlands Watch member Richard Bernard, who favors building homes and light industry on airport property.

Converting the airport could force the city to return some \$5 million in Federal Aviation Administration capital improvement grants, spent on such projects as repaving airport runways, installing a drainage system and lighting. And it would take away a valuable resource that critics refuse to acknowledge, said pilots.

"They can't see the benefit that every time we get a new business in the county or in Watsonville, they fly in here," said Dennis Smith, a pilot for Granite Construction Co.

For several local companies like Granite, the airport provides easy access to the outside business world.

"They use the airplane just like a cab," said Smith, who flies Granite executives throughout the state and nation.

Granite, which has used the airport since the 1950s, is one of the largest construction companies in the country, bringing in at least \$500 million a year.

"The reason Granite evolved and stayed here is because of the airport," said Mark Boitano, a company vice president.

Almost every day of the week, Boitano flies from Watsonville to job sites throughout California, Ne-

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vada and Arizona. Most company branches, in cities like Fresno, El Centro, Phoenix, Tucson and Reno, are difficult to reach by commercial flights, he said.

"In the construction business there are things that are happening where we have to react quickly," Boitano said.

Even short 18-minute trips to Stockton are a big time-saver for company executives, Smith said, who otherwise would drive two hours to get there. That convenience is a big draw for businesses to the city, say airport supporters.

Other local businesses that use the airport include: Brothers and Brothers, Wrigley Co., Gottschalks, Beverly Fabrics and New West Foods. Price Club and Borland International executives use the airport while considering locating nearby, said city officials.

Another 12 businesses that operate at the airport, including five

flying schools, have nearly 60 employees and generate an estimated \$5.2 million locally, according to a 1991 report compiled by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments.

AMBAG also reported that airport traffic is 40 percent business, 40 percent tourism and pleasure flights and 20 percent "other," including student pilot training flights.

Roughly 300 light planes are parked at the airport, with an estimated 105,000 take-offs and landings a year, according to recent estimates by the state Department of Transportation. Larger planes cannot land at the airport because the runway holds only a maximum weight of 69,000 pounds, said French. The largest planes stationed there are executive jets that seat about eight passengers.

In the next decade, city officials plan to build 100 airport hangars.

While that would more than double the 90 existing hangars, the move would not add air traffic as much as shelter planes already parked there.

Expansion is crucial to the airport's future success, city officials said.

"I don't think we're going to be able to capitalize on the airport today like we will five years from now," said Ned Madonia, city director of economic development.

Some neighbors, though, bristle at the mention of expanded facilities. The airport is already a source of noise and air pollution, they said.

"When you talk about increasing (hangars) at the airport, is it for more businesses? Or are you trying to expand the airport for more hobbyists and sightseers?" Larkin Valley resident Peter Nichols said at a recent council meeting.

Others, like Calabasas Road resident Catherine Hudson, claim the airport is a "plaything for the rich

"Expanding the airport in our backyards exploits us and our meager property values," Hudson said.

Councilman Al Alcalá reminded the critics the airport was there before they moved in.

Perhaps the biggest threat to airport expansion sprouted up a year ago. It's a small, scrubby vegetation called the Santa Cruz tarplant, or tarweed, which is on the state's endangered species list. Before the airport can expand, a plan to show how to preserve what is estimated to be the largest known tarplant colony of its kind must win state approval. The tarplant also is preventing the airport from selling rich deposits of clay beneath its soil.

Airport officials shake their heads to think that mowing grasses near airstrips cultivated the tarplant colony by killing predator weeds.

"They didn't even know it existed until we wanted to improve the airport," said Bill Cleverdon, owner of an airport flight school.

Watsonville Municipal Airport's 50th Anniversary will be celebrated today at 10 a.m., 100 Aviation Way off Airport Boulevard. Activities will include plane rides at 5 cents a pound, vintage aircraft, food and speakers.