

A Pilots Perspective, #1

By Fred Benton

THE VALUE OF SISKIYOU COUNTY'S AIRPORTS

Everything starts somewhere, and this is the beginning of a monthly column on aviation in general and Siskiyou county aviation in particular. When I proposed such a column to him, SDN Editor David Smith didn't toss me out the door—he actually said “yes”. So, I will do my best. I'll try to convey a little of my interest in all things with wings (birds included). I'll try to spark an interest in planes, pilots, gliders, balloons, RC (radio-controlled) model aircraft, airports, “airport bums”, learning to fly, safety and light aircraft, “Young Eagles”, aerial fire-fighting, profiles of local aviators and more.

Although I told David I didn't plan on getting into local politics, what follows is probably borderline insofar as it is a slightly edited version of my presentation to the Board of Supervisors recently. I was just one of a group of airport users speaking that day. There were numerous concerns, including how the five county-administered airports are managed, as well as some recent rumblings about closing one or more airports. Since then, we've had positive feedback and follow-up from the Board. (Special thanks to Supervisor Lisa Nixon.)

Aviation in Siskiyou county has a long, colorful history. I believe it is in the best interest of all our citizens that this history carries on into the future, through proper funding, maintenance and management of airports, through business-friendly policies toward aviation-related commerce, through fair and timely administration of hangar and ground leases, and through cooperative agreements between the flying community and county government. The only way this can happen is if those persons charged with airport management, including our Board of Supervisors, recognize what unique and valuable assets these facilities are—and then treat local users of our public airports as legitimate partners. Although few managers of small county or city owned airports have broad aviation expertise, this can be mitigated by developing a good working relationship with local aviators.

Remember: these are public-use airports. A pilot arriving here from Oregon, or Texas, or Alaska has as much right to utilize our airports as we locals do. There are

over 5000 public-use airports in the US. Why are all those airports out there? Because they serve the needs of all citizens who depend upon general aviation for a wide range of recreational, business, agricultural, governmental and emergency activities. Much of their funding comes from federal grants, and with those grants come obligations to keep airports safe, well-maintained and in compliance with federal aviation regulations. Every federally-obligated airport must make available the opportunity for businesses to operate on the airport. Are these things happening in Siskiyou county? Many folks here today will tell you they are not.

Unless a small airport is adjacent to, or within a city or town, it's easy for local officials to overlook. But we're here today to remind you of the value of air travelers patronizing local businesses; the value of firefighting aircraft having bases near wildfires; the value of rapid response law enforcement and medical aircraft; the value of charter flights, flight instruction and aircraft maintenance; the value to farmers of aerial application; the value every small airport (think Happy Camp) has when nearby natural disasters destroy bridges, block roads and impede ground travel; the value of scenic flights over our magnificent county; the value of glider, balloon and RC (radio-controlled) flight activity; the value of airport property with business potential. The list goes on...

What is the value of an EAA (Experimental Aircraft Association) volunteer giving an 8-year old girl her first airplane ride, and the girl, now an official "Young Eagle", runs to her mother and exclaims: "That was so awesome! I want to be an Air Force pilot!"

I can tell you: priceless.

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