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Reporter Brenda Erdahl met with Greg Thomes and Wayne Flury after she saw an item in a news release I had sent to the Messenger regarding publicity for our Pancake Breakfast Fly-In at Buffalo. In the release I noted that funds raised from the breakfast would be used to support our scholarship program and to continue upgrades and improvements to our chapter-owned hangar at the Maple Lake Airport which will eventually become our Aviation Education Center. Good reporters are always on the lookout for interesting stories, particularly if they are local, and that effort resulted in this article.

Thank you, Brenda and the Maple Lake Messenger, for being a friend of EAA Chapter 878!

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Refurbished hangar to be new education center

Airport has a lot to offer



The old hangar at the airport has come a long way since the E.A.A. purchased it in 2021. Above, from left, President Greg Thomes and Secretary Wayne Flury stand in the entrance. Visible behind them is the new concrete floor and sheet metal ceiling.

Photo by Brenda Erdahl

By Brenda Erdahl

A sign at the entrance to Maple Lake Airport says home of the Experimental Aircraft Association (E.A.A.) Chapter 878, but it's been a while since their presence has been felt locally.

In years past the group was known for its events like the annual porkchop dinner and fly-in, but when the Mavencamps moved their flight school, Wright Aero to St. Cloud hosting large events at the small municipal airport became harder to do, E.A.A. Secretary Wayne Flury said. The E.A.A. is hoping to bring some of those opportunities back to their home airfield with the purchase of one of the airport's hangars.

The group has been working tirelessly to refurbish the hangar with the goal of making it the association's headquarters and Aviation Education Center, but it needs a lot of work. According to E.A.A. President Greg Thomes the hangar is about as old as the airport itself, which was established in 1966.

Since the E.A.A. is a non-profit and depends on donations of time and money, work has been slow. Since they bought the hangar three years ago, they have covered the old floor with new concrete, added a ceiling with salvaged sheet metal, and last summer they redid the roof. The next step is updating the electrical and adding insulation so the hangar can be used as a meeting place and classroom year-round.

"The goal of all chapters is to have a facility at the airport. It might be an old mobile home or a hangar. It gives us a lot more visibility," Flury said.

A hangar is the ideal facility for the local E.A.A., who originated in Maple Lake back in 1986, and they are hot commodities. At Maple Lake Airport all its hangars are filled with aircraft.

"The airport could probably add 20 more hangars and they would all be filled," Thomes said.

(Note: the above portion of the article was originally published on Page 1 of the June 28 edition of the Messenger; the portion below is from Page 8)

The E.A.A. owns the hangar but rents the land from the City of Maple Lake so both the city and the association win. Now that the hangar is more functional, the E.A.A. wants to slowly bring opportunities back. For instance, "Young Eagles" an introduction to flying and aircraft ride event, is very popular at Buffalo Airport and the program's coordinator wants to start flying out of Maple Lake, Thomes said. Every second Saturday of the month, April through September, children aged eight to 17 can sign up for a free ride with an E.A.A. pilot with the hopes that some of them will be inspired to pursue a career in aviation. According to Thomes there is a huge shortage of aviation mechanics right now as well as commercial pilots. At each event, 20 to 30 youngsters experience flying. It's a short 15-to-20-minute flight, but the program is so popular there is a waiting list.

Thomes himself can think of three individual youngsters who flew with him through the Young Eagles program who are now flying in the military or on course to become commercial pilots. The E.A.A. also offers an Eagles program for people 17 and up. People of all ages take advantage of this program. All the E.A.A. pilots who participate in these programs go through the Youth Protection programs and all their licenses are current, Thomes said.



Chapter members celebrated the acquisition of their new hangar, now with a new floor, in September 2022 by holding their first official meeting in the hangar, complete with a “potluck” dinner.

Photos submitted

The Young Eagles program is a national program that started more than 20 years ago with the goal of flying one million kids by the 100th anniversary of powered flight. That goal was achieved in 2017. Since then, the program has exceeded 2 million Young Eagle flights, Thomas said.

Local E.A.A. members further promote the field of aviation among local youth by visiting high schools as part of their STEM programs. The Maple Lake/Buffalo E.A.A. has contacted every school district in Wright County, Thomas said, and if a district is interested a member pilot will go and speak with the students about aviation. The local E.A.A. chapter also gives out a scholarship every year to a graduating high school senior in Wright County who plans on continuing their education in an aviation-oriented program.



Chapter President Greg Thomes (center) and Chapter Member Pete Radintz (right) got intimately involved with pouring a new concrete floor. Skilled workers from a concrete contractor did the main work. The old floor was in very poor condition.

Though part of a national organization with 1,000 chapters around the world, the Maple Lake/Buffalo E.A.A. is a small organization with only 70 or so members. Proceeds from events like their Pancake Breakfast Fly-in in Buffalo help to raise money to fund its aviation scholarships and continue to develop the future Aviation Education Center at the Maple Lake Airport. Events are open to the public and advertised in the Maple Lake Messenger.

“Having our own facility adds some enthusiasm to chapter members,” Flury said.

The new Maple Lake hangar will also be used for storing planes and building them. Right now, chapter members are in the process of building three airplanes. But the real goal is to provide classrooms for aviation enthusiasts and youngsters who are interested in an aviation career, Thomes said.

The Maple Lake Municipal Airport is a non-towered airport. An estimated 25 to 50 planes take off and land on a given day. In addition to the local E.A.A., it is home to the Legacy Pilot Training flight school run by E.A.A. member Jim Shaddock. He learned to fly in Maple Lake in the mid-1970s under the instruction of Bill Mavencamp and now strives to pass the love of aviation onto the next generation.

“The Maple Lake Airport has a lot to offer, and it is a great place for flight training,” Thomes said.

For more information on the E.A.A. or the Eagles’ programs, visit chapters.eaa.org/ea878