

AIR TAP Briefings

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Building and maintaining good relationships with your board

Airports can be owned and operated in many ways, and an airport's ownership—whether by an airport authority, county, municipality, park district, state, or private owner—will dictate how it's run. For public airports, members of an airport board are appointed or elected to oversee the work of the airport manager and approve funding and high-level decisions regarding airport operations. Most airports in the United States are directly managed by an airport manager who works with the airport's governing board in a variety of ways.

A good partnership between the airport manager and the local airport board members or commissioners is needed for the airport to run smoothly. Keeping the board informed of current activities at the airport, as well as the reason for any changes, increases the likelihood that airport management can move forward with a common goal—and it will help build a good relationship between the airport manager (the implementer) and the board members (the decision makers). Increased effectiveness and the ability to implement positive changes are in everyone's best interest and will keep an airport healthy and viable.

According to the Airport Cooperative Research Program's *Guidebook for Managing Small Airports*, communication and coordination with the airport owner and governing board is one of the airport manager's key roles. The manager serves as the airport's representative onsite and



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to the public, but the owner and governing board assign the manager's responsibilities, and the manager reports back to the board. Typically, the manager performs the day-to-day functions of the airport owner or authority, acting for the board members or commissioners as necessary to maintain efficient operations. In doing so, it is the manager's responsibility to keep commissioners or board members informed of activities that may reflect on them.

Airport managers aren't the only public

employees who must work with governing boards; city and county engineers report to them as well. In a session at the 2011 National Association of County Engineers Annual Conference, Don Theisen, public works director for Washington County (Minn.), outlined some ideas for building an effective relationship with board members. What follows is a list of "10 commandments" for working with an airport board, adapted from Theisen's original recommendations.

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An airport's story: Thief River Falls Regional Airport

Located three miles south of Thief River Falls, the Thief River Falls Regional Airport in northwestern Minnesota is actively involved in providing services and educational tours to the local community.

The airport is owned and operated by the Thief River Falls Regional Airport Authority, which was created in 2011 from an agreement by the city of Thief River Falls and Pennington County. The airport authority has helped the airport stay up to date with regional industry infrastructure needs and has further developed economic growth within Minnesota. Joseph Hedrick has been the airport's manager since 2011.

The airport's primary runway, 13/31, is 6,504 ft. by 150 ft. and was built in 2011. Runway 3/21 is 4997 ft. by 75 ft. The airport also owns five hangars, including two T-hangars, two classic single-stall hangars, and one open-area hangar.

The National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems classifies the Thief River Falls airport as a non-primary commercial service airport.

In 2011, Delta discontinued its services at the Thief River airport, as well as several other small Minnesota airports, to consolidate business and jobs in order to cut costs for the airline. Hedrick says he was dismayed at first, but since Great Lakes Airlines has taken over as the carrier and business has picked up, he's no longer worried about the airport's future.

The airport sees an average of 85 aircraft operations per day. Of these, 64 percent are transient general aviation, 32 percent are



The Thief River Falls Airport terminal

local general aviation, and 4 percent are commercial. Twenty-one aircraft are based on the field.

As the fixed-base operator, Thief River Aviation provides aircraft maintenance and fuel. Multiple businesses operate on the airport, including Hertz car rental, air cargo (Federal Express and UPS), Aabra Delivery and Transportation, Northland

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1. Establish a good relationship with your airport board members. Learn their spouses' names and their dogs' names. In fact, establish good relationships with everyone else, too, because you never know whom your next airport board member will be.

2. Always be available to any airport board member. Let your staff know that anytime an airport board member or local administrator calls, you can be interrupted or pulled out of a meeting—24/7.

3. Never embarrass an airport board member in public. Sooner or later, every board member will say something wrong. Unless someone's going to die as a result, you can always correct the board member in private. If a board member is absent, explain why she or he can't attend a meeting and say that the member is very interested in the topic and will be updated later.

4. Don't ever speak negatively about an airport board member—not even in private. In fact, there's no such thing as a private conversation in this day and age. Even if a board member insults you, take it professionally—not personally. Rise above it. If you go around saying you work for a bunch of idiots, what does that say about you?

5. Always give thanks and praise to the board. If an airport user thanks you, say it was the board that made it possible. Agree with board members before the meeting that if a sticky issue goes a particular way, you'll wear the black hat and they can wear the white.

6. Never ask the board what to do on an engineering issue. If you don't want the board to make engineering decisions, don't ask them to do it. The trick is to frame engineering decisions as policy issues. If there's a sticky issue you don't want to grant, avoid focusing on that particular permit and make the discussion about the overall policy that might apply.

7. Treat every complaint before the board as a top priority—and if you solve it, let the board member pass on the good news. When the board sends you an airport user's complaint, always start the call to the constituent by saying, "I'm following up on your discussion with Commissioner Smith." And the faster the better! Respond the same day, and at a minimum tell the airport user that you're working on the issue and when he or she can expect a complete response.

8. Provide the board with professional recommendations. Give board members the professional pros and cons, and

do it in a way that your neighbor could understand. Don't tell people we build the airport a certain way because that's the standard. Tell them we do it because when a pilot goes off the runway, we don't want him to hit an obstruction that will cause injury or damage. Always tell them a story.

9. Learn that you don't need to respond to every comment. Let the bad ones go by, and let the board bask in the good comments. Also, know when they've bought your milk so that you don't need to sell them the cow. Just let that vote be taken and move on.

10. Never allow a bad vote to be taken. If you know you don't have the votes, find a way to defer the vote to a later meeting. Say, "The board has asked good questions about this—and they're still unanswered, so I'd be glad to come back at a future date with better information on this important issue." Then work behind the scenes. Once a vote has been taken, it's hard for officials to switch it.

Understanding the role that both the airport manager and the airport board members play in operating an airport is important: building a strong working relationship will increase the efficiency of how the airport is run and the ability of an airport manager to do the job well.

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Taxi, and Tri-Valley Heartland Express. The Northland Community & Technical College's maintenance program also works with the airport and had the first unmanned aerial systems maintenance training program in the nation.

The airport has undergone major changes over the last 50 years: the terminal was remodeled, cargo operations have grown substantially, new hangars and a \$5.6 million runway were built, and the Thief River Falls Regional Airport Authority was established. Hedrick says the airport's future may include privately owned hangars.

"One of the biggest challenges facing the airport is the need to grow...to meet the demand for cargo," Hedrick says. Approximately one million packages are shipped from the airport annually. Other challenges include general upkeep of the infrastructure and pavement, and finding sources of income. "We've had to bump up taxes to pay for the equipment and work done," Hedrick adds.

Although the airport doesn't hold regular annual events, Hedrick says it often hosts fly-ins and tours for elementary schools to showcase the airport's work. Providing these services and tours shows how the Thief River Falls Regional Airport exists to serve its community, he says.

Mark your calendars for upcoming AirTAP events

Learn the latest wildlife control strategies at a May 23 workshop with John Ostrom of the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC). The daylong event, to be held at the MSP Drivers' Training Center, will include classroom and field training as well as hands-on demonstrations. The workshop and lunch are free, but reservations are required. Visit the AirTAP website at www.airtap.umn.edu/events/wildlife/ for more information, or e-mail Ann Johnson at johns421@umn.edu.



Looking ahead, this year's AirTAP Fall Forum will be held September 26 and 27, 2013, at the MAC facilities in Minneapolis. Check the AirTAP website (www.airtap.umn.edu) for more information and watch your mail for the event brochure this summer.



UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
TRANSPORTATION STUDIES
CENTER FOR

Airport Technical Assistance Program
University of Minnesota
200 Transportation and Safety Building
511 Washington Avenue S.E.
Minneapolis, MN 55455-0375

