

The Bulletin

SISTERS AIRPORT GETS MAKEOVER

Owner builds new runway, improves access drives and adds aviation fueling

By Rachael Rees / The Bulletin

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A rebuilt runway and new fuel station have brought new life to the Sisters Airport, which city officials hope will drive economic development in the community.

"It's a good improvement to a community asset that was failing in all manners of the word before it was taken over by (its new owners)," said Hobbs Magaret, airport manager.

For decades, Sisters Airport was a one-man operation, owned and operated by Clifton Clemens, who continued to mow the grass and maintain the runway at age 95, according to The Bulletin's archives. Clemens died in 2008 at age 101.

In the late 1990s, Deschutes County officials fought to keep local control over Sisters Airport so it would not be subject to state land use rules.

By 2007, much of the pavement on the apron, the area where planes park, was cracked and deteriorating, according to a state Aviation Department report. The runway width did not meet minimum requirements; the airport had no fuel availability, and to top it off pilots had to pay a fee to land.

In September 2011, Benny Benson and his wife, Julie, bought the airport, where his company, Energyneering Solutions, had been located since 2008.

"The pilot community would tend to avoid this (airport) because of the failing runway," he said.

With the about \$600,000 from ConnectOregon — a state program for nonhighway transportation projects that promote economic development — and about \$150,000 in private funding, the runway was rebuilt, its width expanded from 30 feet to 60. It opened to the public May 24.

Additionally, access driveways for emergency medical services, such as AirLink and Life Flight, were improved. The airport also has a new helicopter landing pad, and on Wednesday, a new 12,000-gallon fuel tank was installed.

On July 4, Sisters Airport will hold its grand re-opening.

The improvements, starting with the runway, have definitely put Sisters back on the map for small aircraft, said Erin Borla, executive director of the Sisters Chamber of Commerce. People will be able to make Sisters their home base.

"There are so many new ideas and things that are happening there. It only means positive things for the Sisters' community," she said. "Not only will it increase tourism ... it will increase (access for) people who want to live here, and their ability to enjoy their hobby or mode of transportation."

More improvements are on the way, Benson said.

The airport is currently being annexed into the city, which will clean up zoning issues and allow the city to further support airport improvement, he said.

Benson plans to improve the business park for his engineering company, and potentially other associated businesses in the future. He also hopes to provide pilot and hangar facilities at the airport.



Benny Benson, co-owner of the Sisters Airport, stands on the new tarmac Wednesday. Construction on the airstrip finished about two weeks ago. A new fuel tank was installed Wednesday, and more improvements are expected. Photos by Rob Kerr / The Bulletin

His goal: to help draw people to Sisters through another mode of transportation — aviation.

Many pilots are business owners, he said. The ability to access an airport could be a major consideration in their decisions to relocate their businesses to Sisters, Benson said, noting he flies frequently for his business.

"We want people to come to Sisters to live, work and play," he said.

Sisters Mayor Brad Boyd said the improvements, ranging from the addition of fuel to eliminating the landing fee, have made the airport safer, more user friendly and functional.

Pilots used to land in neighboring airports in Redmond or Bend, instead of Sisters, because there wasn't the ability to refuel, he said.

"Flying a plane is not like driving a car. If you run out of gas you are coming out of the sky," he said.

Overall, he said the airport reflects where the community of Sisters is going and what it wants to be.

"It's going to be a little gem for us, that airport," he said. "Look at Bend's airport. It doesn't get the commercial flights like Redmond does, but it's been a huge economic driver for Bend."