

SISTERS AIRPORT HAS NEW OWNERS

By John Griffith

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Three years after signing a letter of intent, Benny and Julie Benson of ENERGYneering Solutions, Inc. (ESI) are the new owners of the historic Sisters Eagle Airport, whose first runway was built on the original Sisters Rodeo grounds by George Wakefield in 1935.

The Bensons moved their family to Sisters in 2006 and started ENERGYneering at the Sisters Eagle airport in 2007. In California, Benny learned to fly to avoid the freeway traffic jams. Owning an airport was not something he'd ever thought of.

In 2006 Benny was working on a project in Medford when the couple realized their dream of getting out of the California rat race by moving their family to Sisters. Benny had developed several other projects in the Northwest, so flying out of Sisters was just as easy as flying from anywhere else in the region.

Four years ago, airport owner, local building contractor and CEC District 1 director Dave Clemens had a casual conversation with Benny, indicating that he might be selling the airport. Clemens asked Benny if he was interested in buying the airport. Benny responded, "Well, I don't know how I would ever afford an airport, but sure I'm interested."

A letter of intent followed a year later in September of 2008, and the sale was completed in September 2011. Between 2008 and now, Benny and Dave have been tying up loose ends and working out the details of the sale.

The airport license is classified as "private for public use." The Bensons actually own three business entities on the property; the runway is a separate non-profit corporation of some 22 acres, the 12-acre hanger/office complex is owned by the Bensons as a separate airport LLC, and their company, ESI, rents their offices from the LLC.

Benny's father, Marvin, plans to put in a dedicated "community garden" somewhere on the property, probably adjacent to the Barclay drive entrance. Marvin is known in Sisters Country for his intarsia woodwork.

As a private property, Benny has many options for managing the future of the airport property, which is now under Deschutes County jurisdiction. But Benny is literally putting his money on making the Sisters Eagle Airport an asset for Sisters Country.

"My hope is to rejuvenate a significant community asset," said Benny, referring to his personal investments in planned upgrades.

Benny has hired local resident Hobbs Magaret as the airport and public relations manager.

"Every project in life takes a champion, so I guess I volunteered; then I designated Hobbs. This is a fun hobby that could turn into something cool," said Benson.

"I see this airport becoming three things," said Magaret, "First, as a hub for public safety." He was referring to the Connect 4 Oregon grant he is pursuing, which would fund the resurfacing of the runway, including the helipads for emergency services and fire services.

Hobbs continued, "Second is I see this airport becoming a catalyst for economic development, and also (third) I see it as a laboratory for different ways to apply renewable energy for business and community."



Benny Benson (center), new owner of Sisters Eagle Airport, confers with Mac Hay (right) and Hobbs Magaret (left). photo by John Griffith

In terms of renewable energy applications, Benson and Magaret foresee the potential of putting pipes under the runway when it is resurfaced, and running hot water produced by a biomass boiler through these pipes during the snowy season.

"This would make Sisters Eagle one of the first in the nation if not the world to heat their runway with renewable energy," said Magaret at a recent city council meeting.

They would also employ solar panels on the hanger roof areas.

Other significant post-sale decisions will keep the Bensons busy. They have a number of options to consider and evaluate. Is it better to remain in the county, or petition to be annexed by the city? Should they pursue inclusion in the Redmond/Sisters enterprise zone? Joining the enterprise zone could significantly reduce their city/county fees, and possibly suspend their property taxes for three years.

In the face of all these considerations, the Benson's core business, ESI, continues to expand, with more than 20 full-time employees based out of their office. ESI provides engineering, construction, and operations services for the renewable energy industry. Their core business has been biogas-to-energy facilities, which has been extended to include biomass. ESI provides services for more than \$30 million in renewable energy power plants internationally, nationally and locally, not the least of which is the new biomass boiler at Sisters High School, dedicated by Governor Kitzhaber in October of this year.

Their rapid growth is also drawing significantly from local trade and technical contractors, pouring money from distant projects back into the local Sisters economy.

"What this really shows is how a business can operate out of Sisters, and have an impact, even though their business (clients are) elsewhere," said Sisters Economic Development Manager Mac Hay. "This is a model of how that really works."