

SKY MILES

Small Airports Support Flexible Flying

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

A computer screen displays tiny blue airplanes tracking toward the Washington, D.C., area from across the United States. At the moment, flights are en route from Texas, North Carolina, and Florida. This traffic is headed, not for Dulles International or Reagan National airports, but for Manassas, Va., population 38,000.

Manassas Regional Airport is one of 4,247 publicly owned general aviation, or GA, airports nationwide — airports that handle nonmilitary and nonscheduled flights. There are 57 public general aviation airports in Virginia, of which Manassas is the busiest. In the Fifth District, North Carolina has the most of these, about 62, while Maryland has the fewest, with about 16, according to the 2011-2015 National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems of the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Though largely invisible to the public, these airfields play an essential role in the nation's transportation infrastructure.

They enable hassle-free and flexible flying for recreation, business, and public service — including medical evacuations, law enforcement, and disaster relief. What's more, these smaller fields declutter air and runway space at commercial airports such as Dulles, 14 air miles and 18 road miles from Manassas. That leaves commercial airports free to handle higher passenger and cargo volumes. Dulles itself put Manassas Regional on the map, nearly 11 years ago.

Manassas to Mars

On 9/11, the FAA shut down civilian aviation traffic across the country. When flights resumed at Dulles several days later, only scheduled airline flights were allowed. The other traffic had to go someplace, and that someplace was Manassas.

"We were jam-packed with airplanes," recalls Juan Rivera, director of Manassas Regional. Operations — takeoffs and landings — soared to 800 a day, from roughly 360, and limos

lined up 10 to 12 deep, waiting for Washington VIPs. That went on for weeks, until Dulles was allowed to reopen to GA flights. Manassas can accommodate jet traffic, which requires runway length of about 5,000 feet. Some aviation customers stayed. They liked the convenient and less-crowded Manassas airport, and the lower landing fees.

Before the 2007-09 recession, Manassas handled about 139,000 operations annually. Now, they're at around 100,000. The recession hurt not only airports but aviation in general, including aircraft manufacturing. Fewer planes are flying. But on a Tuesday morning last winter, traffic flowed steadily along the airport's two runways. Student pilots practiced in single- or twin-engines and business jets came and went.

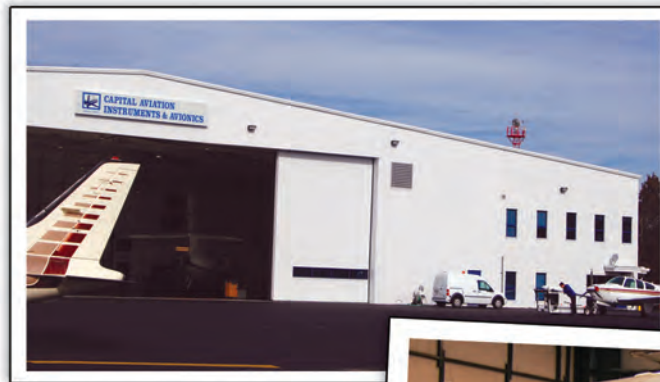
Business leases form the backbone of a GA airport's financial sustainability, according to David Byers of the Aviation Institute at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. "You can only charge the aviation community so much for fuel and parking and other services," he says. It's really all about managing real estate.

Manassas Regional pays its own way through leases, not unusual for a busy general aviation airport outside a metro area. But most publicly owned GA airports can't sustain themselves without a subsidy, especially in remote spots where revenue opportunities are few and far between.

New leases have been a tough sell since 2007, but Manassas Regional's existing hangars are mostly full. There are five flight schools on site, including one for helicopter pilots, and myriad other businesses, including one that will re-upholster or otherwise refurbish plane interiors.

And then there's the small army of Ph.D. scientists working in aerospace at firms like Optical Air Data Systems and Aurora Flight Sciences. Aurora relocated to Manassas Regional in 1991, and flies staff to plants in West Virginia and Missouri and another R&D center in Massachusetts. Although there's no launch pad, the firm's longtime work on its Mars orbiting detection device has sparked the slogan "Manassas to Mars."

For typical GA airports that need public subsidies, economic development provides one rationale. Airports rank at the top of economic developers' must-have lists. If there's no airport nearby, says Virginia Department of Aviation director Randy Burdette, site location scouts lose interest. Without a runway, some businesses just can't do business.



Capital Aviation Instruments & Avionics services and installs avionics at the Manassas Regional Airport. The 35-year-old firm also refurbishes aircraft.

Aviation Dept. Manager Scott Moore pilots the Luck Companies' Beechcraft to dozens of general aviation airports everywhere, mostly in the East.

The Time Machine

The Rock Hill-York County Airport in South Carolina is one of several satellite airports ringing Charlotte. The airport is a preferred fly-in spot for companies doing business locally. One of these is Luck Companies, a firm founded in 1923, and headquartered in Manakin-Sabot, Va., near Richmond. Luck Companies includes several businesses — crushed and architectural stone, real estate development, and clay tennis courts — whose clients and suppliers are scattered far and wide. The firm's pilots fly its nine-seat turboprop plane from its own landing strip to dozens of the nation's general aviation airports; it celebrates four decades of business flying this year.

For the types of products and services handled by Luck Companies, often there's no substitute for meeting face to face. When the firm begins business discussions, locating the nearest GA airport is critical, says Luck's aviation department manager Scott Moore. He points to a map studded with thumb tacks representing each GA airport they've flown into.

The plane saves time. Moore routinely flies associates, for example, to the firm's Leesburg, Va., quarry. The trip is half an hour by air compared to two and a half hours by car. Everyone's back by lunchtime.

"What we've created is a time machine," he says, referring to the firm's Beechcraft King Air. The firm has flown more hours than ever during the recession. Moore says that none of the architects, designers, or customers they've flown has failed to place a major order.

The firm prefers the Rock Hill-York County Airport to Charlotte-Douglas International when associates fly to the studio in Pineville, N.C. In Charlotte, Moore says, they would pay a \$150 landing fee; at Rock Hill, they pay \$50. But the fee plays only a minor role. The real attraction is the proximity of the local GA airport and avoiding the traffic jams that can occur at commercial hub airports. Once Moore spent 45 minutes waiting for takeoff in Newark, N.J. That sounds like a trivial delay to today's typical air traveler, but time is money. It's an unheard of holdup in the GA world. And then there are ground delays. At a GA airport, the rental car is ready to go. "At worst, they have to walk in, sign paperwork, get the keys, and walk out. They are at the airport five minutes, no more than that ever," Moore notes.

When Luck opened its studio in Charlotte, the firm ran daily flights to bring in experts who had worked on the

Richmond studio. "We saved over \$300,000 in fees by using the plane," he says. "If they'd had to go down there and spend the night, all that time is on our clock. We're able to get them home for dinner."

A public GA airport also serves just about every county in South Carolina; the busiest handles about 60,000 operations in a year. Greenville Downtown Airport opened in 1928 as the city's original passenger airport, and at the time was conveniently located for textile business travelers. During textile shows in that industry's heyday, the airport's apron was crowded with planes, says airport director Joe Frasher. Annual operations in the late 1970s climbed to 100,000.

Today, 70 percent of the 205 planes based at Greenville Downtown Airport are business planes. This airport, unlike many smaller ones, can fund itself. Times have been better, but traffic picked up in 2011 by 6 percent over 2010.

The much-smaller textile industry may still fly employees to remote plants, but most of the airport's business nowadays comes from firms like Michelin and GE and the Clemson University International Center for Automotive Research. Three flight schools also operate on the grounds and two charter companies base planes there. "Clemson and the Medical University of South Carolina are also in and out," Frasher says.

These less-crowded GA airports also serve another business market: show business. Celebrities of all stripes can come and go without fanfare. Entertainers who play Greenville's venues regularly use Greenville Downtown Airport. One day as Frasher was leaving, he noticed the singer-songwriter Prince waiting for his limo in the airport lobby. The driver, in a mix-up, had headed to the Greenville-Spartanburg International Airport instead. But Frasher says Prince's anonymity was assured, despite his flashy getup: "There was no one to hide from."

These days Eric Ramsdell is preparing for a whopper, the Democratic National Convention, due in Charlotte this September. Ramsdell is airport manager at the Rock Hill-York County Airport. Though convention traffic will spill over to at least three other GA airports near Charlotte, Rock Hill's airport is only 20 minutes by car from the convention center. Ramsdell expects traffic not only from delegates but also from corporate planes as companies from all over the nation converge on Charlotte to host events. Ramsdell especially welcomes this boost after the downturn. Annual operations peaked in 2007 at roughly 45,000; they currently stand at about 35,000.

Private flying also is a secure way for business travelers to work. "They can work in their own airplane without the fear of someone looking over their shoulders," Ramsdell says.

Roughly 11,000 U.S.-based firms of all sizes depend on business air travel, according to the National Business Aviation Association, and most, about 75 percent, use one small turbine-powered plane or its equivalent. Business aviation had begun to build until the recession. Sales of business aircraft went from about \$12 billion to \$27 billion between 2003 and 2008 before falling to \$20 billion in 2009, along with corporate profits, according to Richard Aboulafia, an aviation consultant with the Teal Group Corp. He describes business aviation as a small but high-value niche.

The planes, he says, are not toys of the rich. "A lot of it is corporate workhorse stuff — not having to ship [employees] through a hub and wasting time."

Luck's Beechcraft is such a workhorse. The firm has also used the plane for humanitarian trips: ferrying supplies to a hurricane-damaged island and flying combat-wounded veterans and families. Businesses commonly use company craft for such purposes. After Haiti's earthquake in 2010, business planes flew more than 700 trips, transporting passengers and delivering supplies to relief groups. The Corporate Angel Network matches private corporate jet schedules with cancer patients who need transport.

The Aviation Dream vs. Reality

Though general aviation grew through much of the last century, it never reached the heights predicted after World War II, when enthusiasts thought American garages would eventually house planes as well as cars. The market for personal aircraft peaked by 1980. The industry faltered, in part, because of legal actions against manufacturers, which drove up prices. GA airplane shipments topped out in 1978 at 17,811; the nadir came in 1994, when 929 single- and multi-engine planes, turboprops, and turbojets were made. (That year, Congress passed product liability reforms to aid the industry's rebirth.)

But innovations could yet transform flight, as demand for

business jets grows, if slowly. The aviation dream is alive and well, certainly for Honda Aircraft Co. chief executive Michimasa Fujino, who in the 1980s began the R&D for "an advanced air-bound Honda." The company employs between 600 and 700 people in Greensboro, N.C., in a half-million-square-foot factory. Spokeswoman Kathleen Bangs says the firm expects certification from the FAA in 2013 for two proof-of-concept planes. A third is to be launched soon. These are known as advanced light jets, comparatively fast, light, and fuel efficient, with a range of 1,300 miles. The jet will use substantially less fuel, which will make it more affordable. Bangs says, "Jet fuel is a huge factor in terms of operational costs."

The market for these and other business jets will recover slowly, says consultant Aboulafia. "Most forecasters, including me, seem to think we'll get back to where we were [pre-recession] in 2015 or 2016."

The GA airports could gain as service to small cities dwindles. Major airlines have cut regional jet use to small cities because of rising fuel prices. It's less expensive for airlines to spread costs among many passengers on a larger jet than it is to fly fewer passengers on a smaller one. In the past two years, 27 cities have lost commercial air service despite these airports' subsidies.

All this may point to increasing charter business, including "fractional" leasing. Buyers may pay for a "share" of time on the jet. Though the number of fractional share owners fell slightly from a peak of 5,179 in 2008 to 4,862 in 2010, that number could bounce back with an overall revival of the small-jet market. The FAA forecasts that the jet fleet — charter planes, among others — will average a growth of 4 percent a year over the next two decades. Flying hours for jets are forecast to average 5.3 percent annual growth from 2012 to 2032, according to the FAA. (In contrast, the number of flying hours for piston-driven planes, the smaller aircraft more likely to be used for recreational flying, is expected to remain flat over the next decade.)

Hank Brown owns the Greenville Jet Center, which handles fuel sales and services, such as arranging charters and operating a flight school, at the Greenville Downtown Airport. "We are going to see more charter business," Brown says. "Every part of aviation was on the increase just prior to the recession."

Between dwindling commercial service, the hassles of security check-in, and flight delays at hub airports, flights in and out of GA airports may present a practical alternative, says Burdette. "Some businessmen will say, 'You know what? My overhead is so high I'll hire an air charter. I can be there quicker and more directly and get home sooner.'" **RF**

Emporia-Greenville Regional Airport is only one of rural America's general aviation airports. See sidebar on our website.

READINGS

"FAA Aerospace Forecast Fiscal Years 2012-2032." U.S. Dept. of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, 2012.

"General Aviation Statistical Databook and Industry Outlook 2010." General Aviation Manufacturers Association.