

Air Boulder

By Bob Yates/March 2020

Hidden away, northwest of 55th and Valmont, is the 179-acre Boulder Municipal Airport. While most of us have seen the occasional single engine plane or engineless glider overhead on a sunny Saturday afternoon, it's likely that few residents have visited the airport itself. The city's airport offers no commercial flights and, unless you attend the airport's annual 1940s-era ball in June in support of veterans, you probably have had no reason to head out there. But, to understand more about this important part of the city, my council colleague Mark Wallach and I did just that, recently spending a half day with Boulder airport manager Denis Godfrey and his boss, Bill Cowern, the interim director of the city's Transportation Department, which has jurisdiction over the airport. And, to see how local pilots try to minimize noise on the ground, I took a small plane flight out of the Boulder airport with former city council member Jan Burton, who also happens to be a pilot. Here is what I learned:

There has been an airfield in Boulder for nearly as long as people have been flying. In 1923, Charles Lindbergh landed at what was then called Hayden Field to accept a challenge to touch down an airplane on St. Vrain Glacier. The stunt was called off due to safety concerns, but a peak near the glacier was named in Lindbergh's honor. Other early aviators flew out of Boulder's airfield, including Colorado's first licensed female pilot, Cara Lemons, and national aerobatic champion Betty Everest. On February 20, 1934, the Boulder City Council took advantage of a grant offered by the Works Progress Administration and converted Hayden Field into the Boulder Municipal Airport. Eighty-six years later, it is the oldest continuously-operating municipal airport in Colorado. To better understand and celebrate Boulder's long relationship with aviation, the Museum of Boulder will open an exhibit this fall called *Above Boulder: People, Planes & Place*.

While that history is all well and good, there are some in our community who eye the Boulder airport as a place for a housing development. They argue that the airport could be closed and its 179 acres turned into thousands of units of new housing to address the community's affordable housing needs. Before considering whether that's a good idea—or even financially feasible—it's important to understand what services the Boulder Municipal Airport provides our community. The following are five things that I learned on my recent tour:

- 1. Emergency Response:** Probably the single greatest value the Boulder Municipal Airport brings to our city is its ability to provide essential services during times of civil emergency. Transportation director Bill Cowern explains, "It is tremendously important to have an airport when there is a natural disaster in our community." Bill reminded me that, during the recent wildfires at Fourmile Canyon, Flagstaff Mountain, Cold Springs, and Sunshine Canyon, the airport served as a command center and water and refueling station for the planes and helicopters fighting the fires. More importantly, during the 2013 flood, the Boulder airport served as an evacuation point for 1,200 area residents who needed to be airlifted and otherwise moved out of harm's way. The Boulder Office of Emergency Management is located at the airport and has permanent facilities there to convert it into an emergency command office on a moment's notice. Without these facilities in our community, search and rescue, firefighting, evacuation, and other emergency assistance would have to be located outside of Boulder, decreasing the opportunity for rapid response to our residents in need.

- 2. Climate Research:** The Boulder Municipal Airport is home to several aviation-based organizations that provide critical climate assessments and research, used worldwide. Given its location in the middle of the country and its proximity to our Federal Labs doing climate research, the Boulder airport is an ideal location for these organizations to base their airborne data-collection operations. These include the National Ecological Observatory Network, which deploys aircraft nationwide from the Boulder airport to carry “airborne observation platforms” to collect environmental data for use in assessing climate change. Similarly, a small company called Scientific Aviation uses the Boulder airport to launch its specially-equipped planes to places around the world to detect CO₂, methane, and other greenhouse gases contributing to climate change. Bill Cowern, who took responsibility for the Boulder airport recently and who has been learning about it ever since, says that the climate action organizations based at the airport were something he never previously considered: “I didn’t realize how important the airport was to businesses that combat climate change. Scientific Aviation is world-renowned and we’re fortunate to have it based in Boulder. It’s a real jewel. We’d love to see more businesses at the airport like Scientific Aviation. Boulder could be a hub for airborne climate action work.”
- 3. Training:** One thing I learned on my tour of the Boulder airport that there is a severe and growing shortage of commercial pilots in the U.S. and around the world. This is caused by several factors, including the significant increase in passenger and air cargo flights and the cost of pilot training. Often, people who want to obtain a commercial pilot’s license first train on small planes at municipal airports such as Boulder’s. After they establish competence in small planes, they can qualify for commercial flight schools. “We do our part to train people to fly and to reduce the dearth of pilots in the country,” Bill explains. Thus, the Boulder airport, with its flight schools at Journeys Aviation and Specialty Flight, can serve as an entry point for young people striving for careers as commercial pilots. Think of it as community college for aviation. Bill says that he hopes that, with some financial support, that training can also support the community’s equity goals by helping young people who don’t have economic opportunity learn to fly and pursue aviation careers.
- 4. Economic Vitality:** According to a January 2020 report by the Colorado Department of Transportation, the Boulder Municipal Airport supports 259 area jobs, with a total payroll of \$15.5 million. The report says that the airport directly and indirectly contributes \$55 million to the Boulder economy. Sales and fuel taxes and user fees at the airport bring in more than it costs to operate the airport, making the facility self-sustaining and a net contributor to the city coffers, something that few other city facilities can claim. This profitability allows the city to make the airport available free of charge to several organizations for training and operations, including police departments, the U.S. Forest Service, the Air Force Academy, the Civil Air Patrol, the National Guard, and many nonprofits.
- 5. Recreation & Open Space:** About 100 area residents keep their small planes in hangers at the airport. Folks with a little courage can book an appointment at the airport’s Mile High Gliders to be taken up for a quiet ride high above Boulder with a professional glider pilot. And a significant part of the airport’s 179 acres is actually open space, protecting critical habitat, as well as hosting the trailhead for the Cottonwood Trail.

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While the prospect of closing the airport and converting its 179 acres to potential sites for affordable housing may be tempting to some people, it is probably neither financially feasible nor advisable. In addition to losing the benefits described above, Boulder's covenant with the FAA would require that, upon the closing of the airport, Boulder would have to pay the FAA more than \$100 million, in consideration for the FAA's financial support of the airport over the decades. This is money Boulder simply doesn't have and probably couldn't get. As Bill says, in a bit of an understatement, "Financially, this would be a big hit." So, while adding affordable housing is certainly a laudable objective, there are probably better places to do this than at the Boulder airport.

Although the airport certainly has positive attributes, what of the negative impacts? Don't airplanes make noise that disturb residents below? With many legitimate concerns about increased air traffic and resident-disturbing changes in flight patterns from the Denver International Airport and the Rocky Mountain Airport in Jefferson County, shouldn't Boulder residents have the same concerns about their own municipal airport?

During my tour of the airport and on my flight with Jan Burton, I learned the airport management and the pilots themselves are quite sensitive to ground noise impacts and take significant steps to mitigate them. For example, most planes at the Boulder airport take off to the east (wind permitting) and quickly gain elevation over rural areas with few houses. Upon return, they typically fly over the Diagonal Highway northeast of Boulder and stay east of 30th Street on their approach to the runway. On the airport's page on the city website, you can see a red-shaded map of "Noise Sensitive Areas" over housing in the main parts of Boulder and Gunbarrel that pilots avoid at lower altitudes. Nighttime and early morning flights are strongly discouraged. Glider tow planes are equipped with noise-minimizing propellers.

In addition to these noise mitigation techniques, the number of flights out of the Boulder airport has actually decreased over time. In the mid-1990s, there was an average of 100,000 take-offs per year. Over the past decade the number of flights has averaged less than half of that, ranging between about 40,000 and 50,000 flights annually. Indeed, one of our biggest noise challenges is not with pilots flying out of the Boulder Municipal Airport—who are typically quite respectful of our noise mitigation efforts—but with pilots flying over Boulder out of the Longmont and Rocky Mountain airports, some of whom may be less familiar with Boulder's noise procedures.

Bill explains that there are encouraging new developments in the field of e-planes, airplanes that are all electric and, like their earthbound counterparts, use no fossil fuels and are virtually noiseless. Several companies are finalizing prototypes for FAA approval, with test flights to begin as early as next year. Boulder is hoping to be one of the early test airports by adding airplane electric charging stations that can also be used for electric cars parked at the airport. While it will undoubtedly take many years before e-planes fully replace gas-powered ones, our skies should grow even quieter in the coming years as electric plane adoption grows. "I really like where aviation is going on electrification," says Bill. "We have the opportunity to be one of the first airports in the country to support electric planes as they come on board over the next few years. We can do our part to combat climate change and to reduce noise. That would be something that is very Boulder."