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FEATURED

Airport finally has its day

By CHAD DRURY Courier staff writer

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Pam Kaupins, Ottumwa Regional Airport Commission member, and Scott Marler, director of the Iowa Department of Transportation, cut a ribbon to mark the completion of the airport runway project Saturday at the airport. The project was completed in 2019 and extended runway 13/31 to 6,000 feet, one of the longest in Iowa.

Chad Drury/The Courier



OTTUMWA — The Ottumwa Regional Airport runway project was completed almost two years ago.

Amid overcast skies and several onlookers, officials finally got to celebrate a work that started long before.

Local and state officials gathered for a ribbon-cutting ceremony marking the grand opening of the airport since runway 13/31 was reconstructed and extended to 6,000 feet in the fall of 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic prohibited a celebration last year, but it finally had its moment Saturday.

"When Mayor (Tom) Lazio reached out to invite me here today, I was excited about the opportunity to see first-hand the reconstructed and extended runway 13/31," said Scott Marler, director of the Iowa Department of Transportation, who cut the ribbon with airport commission member Pam Kaupins. "Ottumwa Regional Airport has a storied history that dates back to the 1940s as a Naval training facility. The Iowa DOT has been proud to support the success of this regional facility, and the Ottumwa community as a whole.

"Our mission is to make lives better through transportation," he said. "We hope it will provide support economically and for aviation for many years to come."

The airport runway project was funded in large part by grants from the Federal Aviation Administration, with more than \$6 million in grants poured into the project. The project took several months to complete in 2019, and left only a secondary runway available. But what resulted was an extension that makes the runway one of the largest in the state, and able to land any type of aircraft in an emergency.

However, the seeds of improvement were planted in 2014, grants were secured four years later and a contract was awarded to Manatts Inc. of Brooklyn that same year.

The city of Ottumwa then took over operations of the airport in the spring, and an upcoming project includes some repaving, patching and other maintenance to runway 4/22, which should take place later this summer or early fall, airport manager Chris Cobler said during a tour of runway 13/31.

Yet, from the airport's history of training Navy pilots and Tuskegee Airmen to today, the airport has been a beacon for the community, one many feel needs to continue.

"I think what we've done here at this airport is going to be a game-changer for southeast Iowa," state representative and Ottumwa native Cherielynn Westrich said. "I think that this airport needs to be included in any conversation that we have about economic development. Our community is growing, and our economic development needs to grow and bring more people in."

Lazio mentioned that the airport is city-owned but on county land. He believes the airport needs to be a pillar of the region.

"I've said for years that this airport is a diamond in the rough and something that needs to be developed," Lazio said. "And with this new 6,000-foot runway, we can handle most air transportation, and I think that speaks well for the future for economic development and for aviation transportation.

"So things are looking bright," he said. "We're moving forward."

— Chad Drury can be reached at cdrury@ottumwacourier.com, and on Twitter [@ChadDrury](https://twitter.com/ChadDrury)

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