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Airport's new-generation technology improves accessibility and safety

By LARRY DEVINE
News Editor

A new safety feature introduced last month at Carroll's Arthur N. Neu airport has enhanced the facility as a premier general-aviation airport in west-central Iowa.

Utilizing GPS (global positioning system), pilots can now land at the airport when the cloud level is as low as 300 feet with 1 mile of visibility ahead. Previously the limit was 500 feet. The new technology also eliminates the need to make high-bank, dogleg-pattern final approach course. Instead, there will be one approach fix, improving simplicity and safety. Veteran Carroll Airport Commission members Norm Hutcheson, chairman, and Greg Siemann say the Carroll airport, located three miles east of town, appeared to be the first general-aviation airport in western Iowa to have use of the technology.

"It's good news for the Carroll airport. It shows our airport continues to be on the leading edge of regional airports in western Iowa," Siemann comments.

Siemann calls the new system third-generation technology, which began with non-directional beacons in the 1940s or '50s and then stepped up to GPS 15 to 20 years ago.

"The FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) has rapidly embraced that technology as an answer to saving money in the new national air-space-transportation system," Siemann says of GPS.

"Satellite system has changed aerial navigation, just as it did for farming, trains, trucking, ships at sea, everything we do," he adds. "It's been a learning curve for the equipment manufacturers, as well as the FAA to develop new procedures to take advantages of all the improvements in technology." The previous GPS system, allowing the 500-foot ceiling, 1-mile visibility, has been available at Carroll airport about seven to 10 years, Siemann estimates.

Hutcheson notes the Carroll airport is one of the busiest general-aviation airports — airports without airline service — in western Iowa, with 600 to 700 landings a month, according to federal and state transportation counts. Business traffic to Carroll and communities throughout the region account for a large percentage of those landings.

Siemann and Hutcheson estimate there may be as many as 60 days a year when the ceiling is below 500 feet. Siemann says, "It gets very difficult for a business if it has a meeting scheduled and they can't land in Carroll. They have to go to Des Moines, rent a car and drive out here, whatever they have to do."

Hutcheson says of performing instrument approach under low-cloud conditions, "When you break out of the bottom edge, you have to be able to see at least a mile ahead of you and you have to be at least 500 feet (above ground)."

At that point, "Everything happens real fast," Siemann adds.

Siemann says of the technology upgrade, "It makes our airport significantly more usable in inclement weather." The new system is available on the 5,500-foot-by-60-feet main runway, which runs southeast to northwest. It doesn't apply to the crosswind runway.

A condition for getting the new system was recent completion of a parallel taxiway that runs the full length of the main runway. That's eliminated the possibility of a plane taxiing out for takeoff when a plane's approaching for landing. Siemann and Hutcheson emphasize the new technology has been activated without installation of new equipment and without expense to local taxpayers.

The system is satellite-based, using equipment already in place. The FAA did flyovers to check approaches to the airport before activation.

Siemann says that in order for pilots to use the system they must have latest maps and equipment in their planes.



New-generation GPS technology system at Carroll airport lowers the instrument flight approach to 300 feet cloud level and 1 mile visibility on the main runway. Daily Times Herald photos by Jeff Storjohann



Construction of the taxiway parallel to the main runway was a condition for receiving the new system.

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"Most good single-engine airplanes now will have a GPS system that will handle this," Hutcheson says, adding that pilots with older planes without the equipment wouldn't shoot an instrument approach anyway. Siemann says pilots will be required by 2020 to have equipment to use the next-generation air-traffic-control system. "After 2020, if you want to fly an airplane, you're going to have to have the equipment to utilize this or you're not going to be able to fly," Siemann says.

Siemann attests to the accuracy of the new system, giving it a tryout shortly after it was activated. "It worked perfectly. Just like it looks on paper, that's how it looks in the airplane," he says.

Hutcheson says, "It's just like in your car. Dial it in, and it leads you right up to the back door."

Siemann says advantages of the system are threefold: ability to handle more traffic at lower cost and with more safety. Hutcheson serves on the State Board of General Aviation Airports and over the years has developed strong ties with state and federal aviation officials. Carroll has been highly successful in attracting federal and state funds for major airport improvements with little local taxpayer cost.

And Hutcheson says of the grants, "That doesn't come out of general tax funds. That comes out of passenger-loading fees, fuel fees. It all comes from the flying public. If you don't fly, you don't pay. We've been very fortunate in Carroll in Carroll to get a good portion (from the National Aviation Trust Fund)."

The Carroll airport is a popular stop for pilots on long-distance flights that want to refuel quickly and take a short break, Hutcheson notes.

"We have the services in Carroll where they can refuel and be back in the air, while in Omaha or Des Moines they'd still be taxiing in," he says.

The Carroll airport receives a lot of turbine and jet traffic from businesspeople on their way to Carroll and area communities such as Ralston, Manning and Denison.

"We have the services and amenities at the Carroll airport, plus the community itself has the amenities (with restaurants, motels, courtesy-car service)," Siemann says. "It's just part of Carroll staying on top in west-central Iowa as a business community. It all works together."

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