

[https://wfcourier.com/business/local/independence-airport-renamed-for-longtime-former-manager/article\\_5c7e56bd-fe8b-518b-a8fc-11d2312289a8.html](https://wfcourier.com/business/local/independence-airport-renamed-for-longtime-former-manager/article_5c7e56bd-fe8b-518b-a8fc-11d2312289a8.html)

## Independence airport renamed for longtime former manager

ANDREW WIND [andrew.wind@wfcourier.com](mailto:andrew.wind@wfcourier.com) Apr 6, 2019 Updated 15 hrs ago

\$3 FOR FIRST 13 WEEKS



INDEPENDENCE — For nearly five decades, Jim Connell was the face of the Independence Municipal Airport.

Now, seven years after he retired as airport manager, it's adopting his name.

Signs were installed last week renaming the airport James H. Connell Field. Connell also is prominently featured in a history display on a wall in the terminal.

Connell, a member of Iowa Aviation Hall of Fame, said he appreciates this honor immensely.

“I’m completely overwhelmed by it. After all the years of doing what you love,” he said, it’s “a real great treat.”

On Saturday, the city will hold a ribbon cutting and open house to publicly honor Connell, who started at the airport in 1967 as its fixed base operator. The fly-in/drive-in event will be held from 1 to 3 p.m. at the airport, 1684 230th St., on the western edge of Independence.

The airport board recommended the name change, which was approved by the Independence City Council in January. The road going into the airport also has been renamed Connell Avenue, another change approved by the council in January.

Several community leaders during Connell’s time said it was appropriate to name the airport for him.

“It’s a worthy honor,” said Wilbur Nielsen, a retired business owner who was part of the effort to improve the airport over the years. “He was a driving force, he overcame a lot of obstacles.” Nielsen added, “He was a great instructor, a very good pilot.”

Frank Brimmer, who served as Independence mayor for 20 years in the 1970s and ‘80s, noted Connell flew him to some of the meetings that were part of his official duties.

“He always ran a good ship and was a good manager and a good friend,” said Brimmer. “I think he’s very deserving of it.”

Connell started his commercial aviation business at the airport in 1967 and served as its operator. He was appointed airport manager in 1980 and retired in 2012. During those 45 years, he racked up honors for aircraft maintenance and aviation.

Throughout his tenure at the airport, Connell made it his mission to host as many public events as possible. That included free airshows held there for close to 30 years. But he started with very few resources.

“When I came to the Independence airport, there was nothing here,” he said. The open field and 2,800-foot by 50-foot sub base runway with no lighting was still an improvement over the grass strip at the prior site to the west. Over the decades, though, many upgrades have resulted in what is now an Enhanced Services Airport that can support small jets for eight to 12 passengers, according to Connell.

“It’s the finest airport in Northeast Iowa for general aviation,” he said. “It’s quite an honor for the city to have that.”

Initially, the city constructed a building about the size of a double garage. In 1971, airport enthusiasts under Connell’s leadership constructed the first office building while renters built three community hangars. The first metal shop building followed in 1972, constructed with financial support of the Indy Aviation Boosters, Inc.

Aviation boosters next supported him in building the first row of 10 T-hangar stalls, providing rented storage for turbo prop airplanes. The Federal Aviation Administration also funded installation of a non-directional beacon, a ground-based low-frequency radio transmitter used in aircraft navigation.

In 1985, a \$6 million expansion project resulted in a second terminal building and an upgraded 4,000-foot by 75-foot concrete runway. It included automatic lighting, a visual approach slope indicator light system and strobe lights.

Connell helped to secure more than \$17.5 million during 2010 and 2011 for improvements made possible by the longer runway. This final project, a whole transformation of the airport, was aimed at attracting the small corporate jets it now serves. It was done in three phases to take advantage of available state and federal dollars.

He and his wife, Karen, were instrumental in securing the automated weather observing system unit located at the airport. Ownership and maintenance of the AWOS system remains with the state of Iowa.

“As I look back, I think of all the supporters,” said Connell, from local aviation enthusiasts to the federal government. He noted that various taxes related to the industry are earmarked for the Aviation Trust Fund and then distributed to airports through grants. “I couldn’t have done it all myself.”

Connell is keeping in touch with his aviation roots during retirement.

“I have a little small business that I call Aircraft Restoration & Fabric,” he noted. Connell’s personal project is to completely restore a Piper PA-12 Super Cruiser. “It’s the same model (of aircraft) I had my first airplane ride in.”

---

**Andrew Wind**

Education Reporter

Education reporter for the Courier

