

Iowa City Municipal Airport activity surpasses pre-pandemic levels

City-owned airport is a 'strong piece' of the local economy



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Michael Tharp, airport manager, is photographed at the Iowa City Municipal Airport on Friday, Sept. 24, 2021. (Rebecca F. Miller/The Gazette)



IOWA CITY — After 103 years of takeoffs and landings, the Iowa City Municipal Airport has a “strong future” ahead after bouncing back from the effects last year of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The facility has had “some of its best months of activity” in the past year, Airport Manager Michael Tharp said.

The facility uses fuel sales as a method of tracking operations as the airport doesn't have an air traffic control tower, Tharp explained.

During the start of the pandemic in Iowa in 2020, fuel sales dropped about 80 percent to 85 percent in March and April, Tharp noted. By the summer, fuel sales had started to return to 2019 levels of activity.

Overall, fuel sales dropped 10 percent in 2020, Tharp said.

But fiscal year 2021, which ended in June, set a record for fuel sales, according to Tharp. About 420,000 gallons of gas were sold through the airport during fiscal year 2021.

“Not only have we been able to come back to the base levels of where we were, but we've continued to grow above and beyond that,” Tharp said.

The city-owned airport is a general aviation airport, which means it does not include commercial airlines or military operations.

Most of the activity at the airport is charter activity, with aircraft fitting eight to 10 passengers, Tharp said. Citation I and Citation II planes are common, and occasionally there will be something larger, such as a Gulfstream IV or V, he added.

Medical traffic, flight instruction, recreational flying and agricultural operations also fall under general aviation.

Tharp said the airport has 90 based aircraft and roughly 30,000 operations per year.

The airport also has meeting rooms, a viewing area and informational displays about its aviation history.

The airport had a “major facelift of all of its facilities” throughout the past two decades, including repair maintenance work, rebuilding the runways and adding hangar space, Tharp said.

The facility celebrated its 100th anniversary in 2018.

“It was a lot of work to take the airport from what from what it was back in the '80s and '90s, and make it something that worked well with today,” said Tharp, who has worked at the airport for 17 years.

Before being airport manager, Tharp was an intern and then an operation specialist.

The airport's budget used to be “heavily dependent” on city tax dollars to support it, Tharp said. But for the past five years, the airport has been self-sufficient in covering its operational costs without additional tax dollars.

The city invests \$100,000 in the airport as part of the capital improvement program, Tharp said. These funds are used for grant matching, he added.

"Basically for every dollar the city's putting into the airport, just off the bat it's getting about \$20 worth of improvements on that investment," Tharp said. "It's a really good deal for the city, and that's even before you factor in the rest of the economic impact that the airport does."

The airport is a "strong piece of the economic engine" of the city and Johnson County, Tharp said. The airport can serve as a "first impression" of the city and Johnson County because the airport is one of the first places prospective businesses see when they fly in.

Billion Auto, Procter and Gamble, companies affiliated with the University of Iowa and construction companies are among those who use the airport to fly into Iowa City to conduct business.

"The advantage of aviation is we can get everybody point to point," Tharp said.

"You don't have to rely on the hub-and-spoke system of commercial airlines. You don't have to sit in the airport for three hours waiting for security and baggage."

Tharp said the Iowa Department of Transportation is in the process of updating aviation's impact on the state's economy. That report and updated numbers could be released sometime next summer.

The Iowa City airport had about \$11 million of economic impact a year when the report was [released in 2009](#).

Because activity has "grown immensely" since then, Tharp expects those numbers to increase pretty significantly for Iowa City and is looking forward to seeing the study results.

"The airport as far as an investment to the area, as far as the money that local governments put into it, is a tremendous return on investment," Tharp said.

"We're going to continue to grow and serve the aviation community the best we can."

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