

Johnnycake Airport

Post Mortem of an Effort to Save Johnnycake Airport (22b)

Two hundred forty-seven acres of wetlands and open space in an area with school crowding. A 50-year tradition of an operating airport attracting the highest value homes in town. How the hell did we lose this one?

There were four reasons, and lessons for all of us. First, the economics of the airport fell apart. Second, the airport stopped being important to the town. Third, the pilot community eroded to a group of twenty that would show up for pizza and only one that would work to preserve the place. Finally, the pro-development forces were successful in associating preservation of an airport with an abuse of eminent domain.

22B was Johnnycake Airport, the only airport in Litchfield County, Connecticut, about 20 miles west of Hartford. The airport had a classic start in 1953, when an energetic New England farmer agreed to move his cows out of a pasture, and the airport then grew into a 3400' paved runway and 40-50 planes tied down and hangared, with 25 employees working at the several small businesses based there. The farmer sold some land to the hangar operator, and they had a handshake agreement to work together in operating the place. Like most airports, it was an economic engine for the area, allowing celebrities to fly to their country places, local small manufacturers to get to their customers, and everyone in town to enjoy a small airport filled with creative and energetic people. This was the perfect country airport – there couldn't be any kids hanging on the airport fence, because there was never any fence.

During the 1980's and 1990's, the farmers moved out, developers moved in, and people started to talk about "old" versus "new" residents of town. Roads and homes started to roll over the forested hills, and the new residents had new and different expectations about the quality of the roads and access to shopping and entertainment. The town began to look like the Hartford suburbs: bedroom communities focused on the school system and recreation programs. Busy young families without much time to volunteer on town committees, but their votes have started to move the town towards their values. Still, the airport was a respected part of town life, and on the weekends the kids played their soccer games on fields 200 yards from the touch down point.

All were sad when, after a vibrant and productive life, the farmer died in 1990. His heirs sold the property to a local real estate speculator, a junk dealer who was making a small fortune selling old bottling equipment to microbreweries. The junk dealer had lived in town since 1978, and he promised to keep the property an airport. With that good promise in hand, the town felt secure in moving forward with a privately owned airport, and did not pursue municipal purchase and operation of Johnnycake. In 1993, the junk dealer bought the runway half for just under \$1 million.

The speculator was interested in making money from his investment, but unwilling to do the simple hard work of attracting pilots to a well maintained airport. He was the worst kind of absentee owner – he expected the pilot's association to maintain the property, pay the taxes and pay him rent, and meanwhile he used the edges of the airport to store trucks and machinery. He was adamant that he would not invest in the property, but was always dashing into the FBO and pilot's association office with new orders. He became fascinated with attracting jets and package delivery services, and repeatedly ordered others to dump fill and thus increase the runway length.

The first sign of a dying airport was when the economics of the airport fell apart. The junkyard dealer refused to give any long-term leases for use of the runway, and no one would invest in their own businesses without such a lease. The town brought in airport consultants to try to turn the place around, but the junk dealer refused to change, and refused to make any investment of his own. The resident FBO gave up on Johnnycake and now operates the airport in Meriden, Connecticut, 25 miles south. The airport facilities started to decline, and the small businesses moved on - no flight instruction, no fuel sales and no war bird rides.

The second sign was when the town had still less reason to come to the airport, and it became a nice piece of open space seen from a passing car. The airport stopped being involved with the life of the town, with no young eagle activity, no school tours, no community meeting center, no medevac or angel flights. The surviving pilot group focused on survival of the airport, which they took to mean pacifying the junk dealer and patching the runways. The hangars looked shoddy - even as open space, it would have looked nicer without the decaying former FBO building and hangars.

The third cause of death was that pilots began to move away from the airport. Those with enough land in town cut their own grass strips, and those without either moved to other airports or dropped out of flying. The remaining group saw the airport as a source of frustration more than gratification, and attended airport meetings due to force of habit and old friendships. Activities that engage pilots fell off the calendar; there were no new pancake breakfasts, no fly outs to other airports, and no events that could be used to bring in the non-pilot community. Without flight training, the new blood flowed to other airports.

I am one of the new residents in town, and in July 2003 I moved into an executive home built under the flight path. By the time I moved to town, Johnnycake was an airport to avoid. As a student pilot, I had flown into almost every airport in Connecticut, but my CFI kept me out of Johnnycake – too many accidents, and a pilot group with bad radio habits. The hangar doors were usually closed and the FBO building had been locked and abandoned. That's all I knew of it, and there was no other reason for me to go there.

Soon after moving to town I was recruited into a drive to pass a school building referendum, and saw first hand how difficult were the issues of long term planning for this town. Our New England traditions of town meetings and public participation have the dark side of limiting the authority of zoning and land use planning. The public forum frequently rewards the loudest side of an issue, and certainly rewards those who can turn out enough people to fill a room and force the other side to stand outside. That's a challenging heritage when you have the fastest growing town in the state.

The schools referendum passed in December, and in April I finished my tax filings and looked up to see that there was to be a town meeting about the local airport. The junk dealer had decided to break the partnership and close the runway, and there was just enough residual feeling in town that the Selectmen had called for a town meeting on the matter. Did the town have any interest in keeping the airport? My wife had made friends with the wife of the head of the pilot's association, and next thing you know, I'm on the team and putting up signs alerting the town to the upcoming meeting. I did some research, did a financial illustration, and spent some time talking to professional airport consultants. I prepared testimony, just as I would for a legislative hearing.

I thought I knew something about small airports, but I certainly didn't understand the art of politics as practiced by a junk dealer. Mailboxes all around the airport began to fill with anonymous flyers about the pending threats to public safety and town finances. At the meeting, there was an overflow crowd standing in the aisles and doorways of an airless high school auditorium. Over half of the speakers were hostile to airports, talking about terrorism, noise and all the money it would cost to have a municipal airport. Things were looking bad, and I wasn't at all sure how it would go when I began my five minutes of fame.

It went well – people were surprised when I gave some easy statistics about aircraft noise, pleased when I compared lightning and off airport accidents, and delighted when they learned that all the money for the airport would come from the Aviation Trust Fund, and not a penny from their general tax revenues. Pilots talked about the demand for hangar space and the role of medevac and Young Eagle flights. At the end of the meeting, the town meeting had a vote of over 2-to-1 in favor of exploring a municipal airport.

Now came the awful part of small town government. Rather than move immediately to get a federally funded study, the town's leadership waffled and dithered. As they did so, more anonymous flyers appeared in the local mailboxes, and the claims became more plausible, if no more real. The accusations were now that there

was a federal-state-local plot to turn this airport – a New England meadow with less than 2% runway – into a major jet center with around the clock IFR operations. (Note, this is communication from and to people ignorant about aviation – I wonder that they could spell IFR.) The Selectmen’s meetings became a series of mini riots, where the neighbors and local real estate mafia began to take on and wear down the volunteer panel that runs the town. April slipped into May, May into June and July, and still the Selectmen dithered and looked for any additional information they might need before committing to an airport study. This decision was over spending \$650 – that was our town’s share of the cost of study after the incredibly generous federal and state funding.

The pilot’s association and I started to coordinate and send out information to the town, focused on getting better information to those who were clearly getting bad information. I sent to 700 of my neighbors a booklet with a dozen pages of carefully researched information, reviewed by AOPA, the FAA and airport consultants. At the next meeting I was verbally flayed by people who were convinced that the information must be biased, because it differed from what they wanted to believe. At one particularly bizarre meeting, there were calls for a public hanging of the First Selectman. Given that he has served the town for over 20 years and knows over half the town by first name, this was clearly a situation that was getting out of hand. Leading the wolf pack? The two largest land owners in town, with hundreds and hundreds of acres ready for residential development. Their lieutenants were the tradesmen of town, working stiffly who need to keep the development machine going to keep their plumbing company or well drilling rig in operation. Their pawns were the poor schnooks who bought overpriced and poorly built homes under the flight path of an operating airport, and who now want to blame the airport for their woes.

The information campaign just wasn’t working. It was time for something else, and that was humor and an outreach to the town beyond the vicinity of the airport. That got a good response, and over 850 voters sent a note to the Selectmen to get on with the process of getting the federally funded feasibility study. At a critical juncture, the anti-airport crowd showed up with a petition for a town meeting. The town charter allows any petition signed by 50 or more to force a town meeting; while the Selectmen could have declared the petition frivolous, they declined to do so, and agreed to accept the petition and hold a town referendum on the issues of the petition.

And here was the final cause of death – a mistake by those calling for an airport study. The petitioners had asked that two questions be put to referendum. First, should there be a feasibility study for reopening the airport? Second, should the town take the runway property by eminent domain against the wishes of the landowner? What we should have done was urged everyone in town to vote for a study and against eminent domain. We should have been the group pushing for making informed decisions, and against both throwing away a potential economic boon for the town, and also against rushing into any exercise of eminent domain. Me, the head of the pilot’s group and the town’s First Selectman (think “weak mayor”) had a spirited discussion, then decided that a big loss on eminent domain could make the airport study moot, and the town would kill the study. We decided that a simple “vote yes” was the right message, and to focus the information campaign on the study question.

I spent my summer researching and building information pieces. The pro-airport team was the two families – that of the head of the pilot’s association and my own. My son’s friends found that time at our house involved lots of folding and stapling, and we made multiple mailings to the town’s 3500 addresses. There were no volunteers, and far too little time to get a team built. We assumed that if we just got the facts in front of people, they could make the informed decisions that would favor a “yes” vote.

While we were doing that, the developer had “No Eminent Domain” signs on every one of his properties, and while each was an eyesore, the no vote signs outnumbered the yes vote by 2-to-1. The anti-airport group formed a PAC, and 70% of the money came from real estate and construction professionals or the employees of the junk dealer. There were some pretty clear signs of campaign fraud, and the wind had a surprising knack for knocking over yes vote signs while leaving the no vote signs untouched. Other people came out in support of the airport, came from places unexpected and unknown – hand lettered with poster paint on whatever

cardboard lay around, the signs were clearly those of a David and Goliath race. I was the target of some surprisingly vicious email, and my 6th grader had a hard time on the school bus. It was clear that we all need to work on how to disagree without being disagreeable.

It wasn't even close. The anti- eminent domain vote brought record numbers to the polls – 3400 people turned out in a town with 5200 voters. Presidential elections don't get that kind of turnout. The vote was over 2-to-1 against doing the study. Given my strong feelings about the clarity of the information, and the obvious and compelling case for a municipal airport, it seems as if the forces of light and reason got beaten by Homer Simpson. My town now faces the challenge of finding a different future, without the ability to use the airport as a part of a creative solution. Wish us luck.

I hate to think that other towns have to feel the same loss that mine will feel. There are lessons I want you to take as you use your own local airport.

Things learned from losing an airport

- 1) Airports are most used by the aviation community, but their existence depends on the good will of the non-flying public. Never forget it. A solo flight is a lost opportunity to share GA with a wider community. Fly your neighbors, young eagles, your precinct captain and your co-workers.
- 2) An airport needs to be profitable, and equally important, it needs to be part of the life of the town. You have to figure out ways to make that happen.
- 3) An airport is a powerful public good, but a developer has a clear and distinct alternative vision that can look like whatever people want to hear.
- 4) Even the most complex facts and arguments can be boiled down to a simple presentation. When it was too late, AOPA recommended bringing the local media (papers, radio and TV) into a 2-hour seminar of what airports do. That could have been very effective in delivering information to the town.
- 5) Organization matters. Nothing beats feet on the street, and battles are won by the bigger armies.
- 6) Because commercial aviation has been so very successful, virtually all voters think that passenger jets are the money making side of aviation and general aviation is for an elite group of recreational pilots. Changing minds is harder than planting first impressions. Fly young eagles.
- 7) Those voters who have been in small planes generally have not used GA to take personal trips, and are too blasé to feel any sense of wonder at climbing above the horizon. They drive SUV's, and don't like loud, small, bumpy rides in GA singles. Whenever you can, describe the business trips, family reunions and positive things that GA has enabled you to do.
- 8) Fears don't have to worry about accuracy and balance in their presentation. Fears come pre-cooked and ready for consumption - fears over facts is an easy political victory. A strong mayor can force a public debate to be responsible and honest – certainly someone has to play the role of fact checker and truth police.
- 9) A skilled politician will not force an outcome or railroad a decision based on personal conviction. Winning over the mayor will not make the airport survive – it will get you access to a platform from which *you* can make the airport survive. AOPA is the same – they cannot save your airport. They can offer you tools and guidance on what you can do to save your airport.

Over the past several days, pilots have been flying low over the runway: you are welcome to come by, and if my family is outside, we'll wave and hope you rock your wings back at us. But this airport was lost, and there is no public use airport in all of Litchfield County. This trend impoverishes all of us and has to stop somewhere, and I regret that we couldn't make it stop here.

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