

Report to City Council of Novato

Rick Beach, Member, Aviation Commission, Marin County
August 25, 2015

As your nominated representative to the Aviation Commission, this is a informal report of activities. Because the June meeting was canceled, there have been only two meetings since my appointment. When I interviewed, I sensed that the Council members wanted more information about the airport and Commission.

Economic Impact of Gness Field Initiated

The Gness Field Community Association (GFCA), a membership organization representing over 150 pilots, airport users and interested community members, sought to create greater understanding and appreciation of the benefits of Gness Field, Marin County's only public-use airport. GFCA raised \$6,000 from donations and contracted with the Marin Economic Forum to conduct an economic impact study. GFCA President Ken Mercer and I met with Robert Eyler last week to begin the study. We expect that their report will be ready in November, which we will share with Chris Stewart of the City of Novato and your Council, as well as the Aviation Commission and the Board of Supervisors.

Public Engagement with Aviation Commission

The Aviation Commission holds public meetings six times a year at the Civic Center. The June meeting was cancelled. Airport users have been increasingly frustrated by the Chair in their attempts to provide public comment at Aviation Commission meetings, contrary to our understanding of the California Brown Act.

At the most recent meeting, the only opportunity afforded the community was during non-agenda public comment at the end of the meeting. This was despite an agenda topic entitled "GFCA." During discussion of that topic, the Chair and Vice-Chair complained about statements contained in the GFCA newsletter and took issue with a web domain name, marincountyairports.org. Such complaints are specifically discouraged by the Brown Act. However, no opportunity to comment was afforded members or representatives of GFCA who were known to be in attendance at the meeting. Members of GFCA are seeking redress.

Lack of Advice and Recommendations to the Board of Supervisors

While the role of the Aviation Commission is stated as giving advice and recommendations to the Board of Supervisors, this happens rarely and usually stated in a County staff report as the Commission approved this action. Despite

requests from me and the public for greater involvement to provide support for airport grants, budgets and actions, the Vice-Chair suggested at the last meeting that the Commission is reactive. Most of the agenda topics are in response to County issues rather than addressing concerns of airport users, despite requests to have these topics included on a meeting agenda. Some topics not addressed include 2015-16 budget for the airport, FAA grant applications for projects at the airport, progress on response to the Grand Jury report, such as rent increases, access to financial information, plans for runway/taxiway rehabilitation, and upgrades to video surveillance. Consequently, airport users feel that the Aviation Commission does not provide the Board of Supervisors with meaningful advice and recommendations that would advance the betterment of the airport.

Concerns for Treatment of Airport Businesses

The Aviation Commission and the County have handled two aviation businesses in ways that frustrate and likely impede the growth of Gness Field.

Skydive Golden Gate

This parachute operation sought a business permit about 18 months ago in April 2014. They wanted to provide tandem skydiving services, an approved aeronautical use at public airports, to visitors and people local to Novato and surrounding areas, something not available in the San Francisco Bay Area. The process was lengthy with requirements changing at each Aviation Commission meeting. Consequently, the proponent filed a Part 13 informal complaint to the FAA. Two letters from the FAA substantiated the complaint and identified several areas where the airport sponsor, Marin County, was not in compliance with grant assurances made when FAA grant money had been accepted. We see signs that the County will have done the necessary work by fall, but only after a lengthy and unfortunate process.

Scanlon Aviation

Scanlon Aviation is the largest business operated at Gness Field. They offer flight training, aircraft maintenance and air charter services. They employ 10 full-time and part-time employees in high-wage aviation jobs, including disadvantaged workers. Last year, they attempted to negotiate with the County to adjust rent to recover from the economic downturn and sustain their growth. Ultimately, they settled last summer on a plan. Recently, the County issued them a 12.35% rent increase that catches up on five years of CPI increases. To date, we have not found any other lease holder who has been subject to a rent increase, including hangar renters on month-to-month leases. We are expecting such increases from the Grand Jury report but were surprised that only a single tenant was given an increase.

Airport users are concerned for the viability of the airport and attraction of aviation businesses. These practices frustrate the employment and economic activity at the airport.