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Airport remains open during storm

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AUBURN — This week's heavy snow couldn't keep the DeKalb County Airport closed. It was open and accepting flights Wednesday, during one of the worst winter storms on record.

Airport Manager Russ Couchman said he and Gene Powell, the airport maintenance and project manager, worked their tails off for about 40 hours, beginning Tuesday night, to prepare for the storm.

Couchman said Tuesday night was spent pushing snow drifts off the 100-foot-wide runway and preparing for the next day's expected snowfall. That preparation included fueling vehicles, replacing the cutting edge on the 21-foot plow mounted on the airport's tractor and installing the blower on the rear of the same tractor to shoot snow 60-100 feet in the air.

At 6 a.m. Wednesday, Couchman and Powell were back at the grind, pushing snow from the runway. Couchman said moving the snow while it was still coming down didn't present too much of a problem.

"We didn't get as much snow as anticipated, so we were able to clear it fairly easily," Couchman said. All of the snow was plowed to the south and the west of the airport grounds, because forecasts showed the snow coming in from the northwest.

"It is really important to plow with the wind," Couchman said. "It dramatically minimizes drifting problems when the piles of snow are already downwind."

Once the runway was cleared around 9 a.m. Wednesday with the airport ready to handle traffic, Couchman said he and Powell went into what he called a "grooming mode." Couchman attached a tow-behind broom to the plow and cleared the runway and taxiways down to bare pavement, while Powell started working on the ramps. Couchman said the airport doesn't salt the runway, due to the salt's potential for corroding aluminum airplanes.

Couchman said he was proud that a Rieke Corp. airplane was able to land at the airport Wednesday around 7 p.m. The runway was perfectly groomed and all hangars were open, with all plowing finished, as of 1 p.m. Thursday, he said.