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## Perceptions buffet airports



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Airports in smaller northeast Indiana communities presently are confronting two difficult problems.

Many residents, airport officials said, do not even realize that their communities have airports, or that those airports offer services for the public. Those who do know the airports are there don't often have the best impression of them, DeKalb County Airport manager Russ Couchman acknowledged.

"It's a mixed bag," Couchman said. "You run across people who don't know there's an airport here."

That, coupled with the impression of the airports as havens for "rich boys with toys," was "absolutely" a view many residents held about the facilities, he added. Those views, in turn, have made efforts to open the airports to the community very important, he said.

Steuben County Board of Airport Commissioners President R. Wyatt Weaver said those views — while partially true — no longer totally fit the facts at the airport.

### Images



Nearly 16,000 people attended a two-day hot-air balloon event at Tri-State Steuben County Municipal Airport. (Jim Shilander/The Herald Republican)

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“I don’t think that it’s as valid as it used to be,” Weaver said. “Every airport needs that core business, and a number of those people who own those planes don’t classify as ‘rich people.’ I know many people who spend less on flying than others do playing golf.”

Others use their planes as a tool for their businesses, Weaver noted.

Nathan Steiner, manager of the Kendallville Municipal Airport, said his facility was trying to combat the stereotype by inviting people to stop by, even if it’s just to watch the active glider community at the airport on the weekends.

DeKalb County Airport, Tri-State Steuben County Municipal Airport outside Angola and Kendallville Municipal Airport will hold events later this year to increase public awareness about their operations.

In addition to those events, the airports are touting their power as economic development engines. Couchman said his airport is responsible for between \$10 million and \$16 million in economic activity for the county, and becomes especially busy around the Auburn Cord-Duesenberg Festival in September.

“We’re quite a bit busier,” Couchman said, adding that the amount of traffic around the ACD Festival and the concurrent collector car auctions generally taxed the airport’s resources to their limit.

“Those fall weekends are really about all we can handle,” he said.

Couchman said to increase public awareness, his airport will host its second-annual open house July 17. The event will include displays about local law enforcement, state police and local emergency

helicopters. He said local economic development organizations and civic groups also have been invited as a way to strengthen the airport's community ties.

The Kendallville Municipal Airport will host the Duesenberg Exhibition of Speed Sept. 3, in conjunction with the ACD Festival in Auburn.

"It's going to be a big event for northeast Indiana," Steiner said, adding there will be national marketing for the event. "This is something unique that usually wouldn't be able to be done at an airport like this."

The airport hosted an annual fly-in and fun day June 19. "Events like that let us get the community out to see what's here," Steiner said.

Tri-State Steuben County Municipal Airport held a hot-air balloon event this month to help raise awareness of the facility. Nearly 16,000 people attended the two-day event, July 9-10.

The airport's board of commissioners also is seeking increased funding from the Steuben County Council and County Commissioners. The airport board believes financing only the administration of the airport has let many of its buildings fall into disrepair.

The board would like to build a new terminal and maintenance hangar, arguing that upgrading those facilities would boost economic development.

"The main economic development impact is for people who are looking to put a business here, they need to know that they can get

their executives to a factory quickly,” Weaver said. “They want to be able to get in their jet, do their business and get out.”

He added: “One of the first questions asked of economic development people is, ‘Do you have an airport, and where is it?’”

*This story originally was published by Business Weekly owner KPC Media Group.*

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