



PHOTOS BY JESSIE VEEDER-SCHOFIELD

Flight path

Watford City Municipal Airport builds for the future

BY JESSIE VEEDER-SCHOFIELD



In the last 10 years, Watford City has pushed the boundaries of its small borders in almost every way imaginable. The unprecedented population boom that came barreling down county roads and highways due to new technology and high oil prices has changed the look of the town and pressed community members and business owners not only to evaluate the future, but to envision it and make plans.

And while new apartment complexes, gas stations, restaurants, schools and businesses popped up along what used to be the city limits, changing the footprint and landscape of the small town forever, the members of the Watford City Airport Authority had their eyes on the sky.

"Ten years ago, this airport primarily served the ag industry,"

said Airport Manager Luke Taylor, whose family owned and operated Taylor Ag Services since 1985 and operated their planes out of the airport before selling the business in 2015. The airport also had air ambulances coming in and out and saw some corporate and personal travel.

But when the oil industry began to pick up, so did the activity in the airport and members of the Airport Authority began to see not only the opportunity to expand, but also the necessity of it.

"The biggest increase we've seen is corporate travel," said Taylor, referring to the oil companies, developers and politicians who come to the area by way of private and corporate planes for work and research.

And so the Airport Authority began to make changes to accommodate, like opening a maintenance shop and moving from unattended/self-service fuel to providing a fixed-base operation business in the airport that sells and pumps fuel.

"Everything on an airport takes lots of planning and time to get accomplished," said Taylor. In the last five years, the airport has also replaced the entire parking ramp for aircraft, replaced asphalt with concrete, built nine new hangers for aircraft and runs a flight school that has gone from one to two students to up to 15 at a time. "There are more services here than ever before," he added.

And it seems it's only going to get better. June saw the grand opening

of the 2,600-square-foot James L. Taylor Terminal, a milestone that was celebrated with a public event where close to 300 people toured the facility, which features a large waiting room, conference room, restrooms, a meeting room and a pilot sleeping room. Guests were also able to tour the Sanford Air Medical Aircraft, World War II fighter airplanes and other general aviation aircraft that were on display. As a fun treat, the airport sold \$10 airplane rides to more than 100 children.

Patience in the process

The success of the opening of the new terminal is an example of the board's patience and diligence in realizing their vision.

In 2014, the Airport Authority received a grant from the state to build a much-needed new terminal building. During that time, oil prices were high and so were the bids to complete the project.

"Hard decisions were made by a very diligent board to not commit to build this terminal for costs that we could not justify," said Jeff Kummer, Watford City Airport Authority chairman. "Seeing this project through to completion is as important today as it was in 2014, maybe even more important."

Taylor agrees. As the manager, he sees firsthand the need for expansion.

"Everyone that comes through our airport comments on how much our accommodations have improved," Taylor said. He explained the terminal building is only a piece of the 10- to 20-year airport layout and development plan being implemented in conjunction with a runway expansion that will allow the necessary runway space needed for larger planes to land in Watford City instead of Dickinson or Williston.

"Right now, we have 4,400 feet of runway, which is a little short for large aircraft to land. The new plan



has potential for 5,500 to 5,800 feet," he said.

The board is also finishing an environmental assessment of the airport. And after completion of a year-long study to help decide the best location for the expansion, it's been determined that the expansion will occur on the existing site and the additional 60 acres needed to accommodate will need to be acquired.

"Our goal is to finalize the airport

layout this year and start acquiring land and designing the runway in 2018 so we can start construction in 2019 and finish the expansion in 2020," Taylor said.

A history of flight

Taylor's role in the future of the airport is particularly special, given the deep ties his family has to the McKenzie County skies. The new terminal was named for his late grandfather who had a long



history in aviation that included his successful run as an aviation cadet in the U.S. Naval Reserve. He then returned home to North Dakota to operate a crop spraying operation that would eventually become Taylor Ag Services Inc., a business he ran with Luke's father Kent, who had a long career in crop spraying and flight instruction. Taylor's uncle, Tim, served on the Airport Authority for several years and stepped down from his job as airport manager before Taylor took the wheel as the

next generation.

"I just love flying," Taylor said. "In this job, I like to meet the pilots with different companies and get to know them and see where they're coming from. And I like being around airplanes and sharing my enthusiasm for flight with others."

And while Taylor's interest and expertise is rooted in those who taught him well, it's also given him a deep connection to his community, keeping him well aware of the pivotal times in which he's working and the

impact an expansion like this will have on McKenzie County.

"Since June 2014, the state of North Dakota has produced 1.2 billion barrels of oil, with almost 0.5 billion barrels coming from McKenzie County," said Kummer, who believes McKenzie County will continue to see growth and expansion over the next decade. "Infrastructure continues to add to long-term jobs in our area and this is why this build-out is so important to our community." ■

BIOGRAPHY OF JAMES L. TAYLOR



James L. (Jim) Taylor was born in 1918 and grew up on a farm northwest of Alexander. After graduating from Alexander High School, he attended Minot State Teachers College for approximately three years. While there, he received his initial flight training through the civilian pilot training program.

Jim passed his flight physical in January 1941 and formally enlisted in April 1941. On July 19, 1941, he was appointed as an aviation cadet in the U.S. Naval Reserve. His wartime service took him to several naval air stations in the United States, where

he served as a flight instructor and was involved in training operations with personnel who participated in the Pacific Theater in World War II. He flew several military aircraft, including the TBF Avenger and the PBY seaplane.

In August 1944, he was assigned to the USS Bunker Hill, an Essex class aircraft carrier which served as the flagship for Admiral Marc Mitscher. Jim was the flight deck officer during his time on the Bunker Hill. In May 1945, the Bunker Hill was attacked by two kamikaze aircraft and was nearly sunk.

After the war ended, Jim was assigned to Patuxent River, Md., where he flew air transport missions in the United States. He also participated in the Berlin Airlift and spent time in Germany as a naval liaison officer in that operation. He flew DC-4 and DC-3 aircraft in these missions.

Jim separated from the Naval Reserve in October 1949 and returned to North Dakota. He operated a crop spraying operation from the family farm for a time, using a military bi-plane aircraft. He graduated from the University of North Dakota Law School and returned to McKenzie County to

establish a law practice and continue farming and flying. Jim owned and flew several aircraft during his civilian life, including a Cessna 180, Piper Aztec and Navajo, and an Air Tractor spray plane. He was known to help ranchers find lost livestock, to fly oilfield equipment to Watford City and to fly football fans to Watford City Wolves football games. In 1985, Jim and his son, Kent, started an aerial spraying business which eventually became Taylor Ag Services Inc. Kent sold the business in 2015.

Jim accumulated more than 8,000 flying hours while in the Naval Reserve, and he tallied more than 10,000 total hours over his 63 years of flying.

Jim was a member of the Lawyer-Pilots Bar Association, and was a longtime member of the Watford City Rotary Club.

As a lasting legacy of his love for aviation, he made pilots of his two sons and four grandsons. He was an attorney and a farmer, but his true passion was flying airplanes. ■