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2013 Success Stories

Airport Economic Impact research and education in Winnebago County—a long-term success story, 2014

Situation:
Wittman Regional Airport, the county-owned general aviation airport located in Oshkosh, WI is most famously known for the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Annual AirVenture Fly-In. In the late 1990s, Wittman Regional Airport lost its commercial air service, rapidly throwing it into a political battle over how to keep the airport open, and ensuing blame game on who was at fault for letting the airport fail. Wittman Regional Airport, while once used for commercial flights, now serves as a hub for over two dozen aviation related businesses, such as kit aircraft manufacturers, aircraft repair businesses, private and corporate hangars, and fix-based operators, that are located on the airport facility. The airport is owned and operated by Winnebago County. The airport facility itself includes state of the art runways, towers and aviation services, and is considered to be an aviation-related business/industrial park by some local economic development entities. Faced with the loss of commercial air service, and growing perception among the public and the County Board that the airport was closed, the County Aviation Committee initially approached Winnebago County UW-Extension in 1997 about helping them demonstrate the value of the airport. Since 1997, the airport has relied on UW-Extension to conduct research and educational programming about the economic value of the airport, which occurred in 1997, 2003, 2007 and most recently in 2012.

Response:
UW-Extension responded by partnering with the County Aviation committee, the Airport Director, and a representative from one of the businesses located at the airport to identify a research response. The primary question, particularly early on, was to understand the economic impact of the businesses at Wittmann. Winnebago County UW-Extension provided education to help the team understand the limitations of this sort of analysis, and possible approaches to estimating economic impact. The research was conducted over a 15 year period from 1998 to 2012. Neiswender partnered with Steve Deller to analyze the data using IMPLAN resulting in a picture of the direct, indirect and induced economic impact of the airport. In 2012, Neiswender added a business climate survey was added as an additional study component. Additionally, Neiswender provided education on the research and results to the county board, county aviation committee, the public, and the airport tenants. The goal of the education was to increase understanding of the study, the limitations and assumptions of the research protocol and help them use the data to inform decisions, policies and next steps.

Results and Impact:
Results of the 2012 Economic Impact Study showed that jobs and wages climbed slightly over the decade, even weathering the Great Recession. Results of the IMPLAN analyses showed direct, indirect and induced impact from the jobs and wages provided by airport businesses. In 2012, Wittman Regional Airport directly contributed 548 jobs and $23.6 million in wages to the local economy. With the multiplier effect calculated by
IMPLAN, the ripple effect caused by these jobs and wages generated an additional 308 jobs and $12.0 million in wages. As a result, the total impact comes to 855 jobs and $35.6 million in wages (Neiswender and Biedermann, 2013). Overall, the jobs and wages supported by the Wittman Regional Airport make up almost 1% of the jobs and 0.7% of the wages in Winnebago County. The Business Climate survey results showed that being located at Wittman was very important (76%) or important (24%) for their business. Reasons for being located at the airport varied. The implication of these responses indicate that without the airport, its runways, tower and other aviation services infrastructure, these businesses would not be located here.

Neiswender prepared detailed research summary reports and a Departmental paper discussing the methodology, results and implications of this research in depth.

The long-term impact of the research and education program can be seen in several ways:

- Over time, newspaper coverage about the airport and attitudes towards the airport changed and became more positive
- Winnebago County voted to invest in capital improvements at the airport (new control tower, new equipment, runway extensions) despite the fact that commercial airlines had left. Previously, they had voted to deny investments.
- Winnebago County, the City of Oshkosh, and the Chamber worked together for several years to purchase land adjacent to the airport for future development as an aviation business park.
- Economic development partners began to leverage the presence of EAA to create new opportunities for the airport, and obtained significant grants to support the development of an aviation business park.
- The research data was used to justify keeping the control tower open during the 2013 Sequestration discussions when FAA was deciding which towers to remove.
- An op-ed, written by the Oshkosh Chamber Director in 2013 cited my research as evidence that the airport has tremendous potential as an economic driver.
- The aviation committee of the Oshkosh Chamber has been revitalized and is focusing on writing grants, conducting research and recruiting aviation related businesses to the new aviation industrial park.
- WEDC (the state’s new Economic Development Corporation) see aviation and aeronautics as a growing industry in the state and is leveraging EAA and Wittman Airport to support this.