

## Significant Events Since 1994

By Robin L. Turner, AAE

1. Air cargo: FedEx, searching for a home in this region in 1993, was successfully recruited by LWS. *Because* FedEx landed here, local business quickly learned the benefits of overnight parcel delivery. They found they no longer had to stock several weeks' inventory on their shelves. In many cases, they found they didn't have to stock ANY inventory of certain items—because those items could be acquired via FedEx overnight service. This discovery represented a HUGE cost savings; even the average citizen no longer can imagine what it was like without FedEx. UPS also has a strong presence in the local air cargo industry. Together, FedEx and UPS ship hundreds of thousands of pounds of freight into and out of the region annually, employing dozens of freight truck drivers to deliver cargo to the Palouse, the Prairie and beyond, all from LWS.
2. "South side" evolution
  - a. By 1994, the airport was *almost* out of developable land. A few small parcels were still available—albeit under long-term lease to and thereby under the control of the Hillcrest Aircraft Company. Two other parcels were available for development as private, multi-tenant hangars, and that was it. The northwest quarter of the airport was occupied by an abandoned City of Lewiston solid-waste landfill and therefore unusable. The northeast quarter of the airport was too narrow for anything more than a row of small hangars, and it lacked even the most basic utilities and infrastructure to support development. Terrain and geography prevented repurposing the land occupied by the golf course, while the same could be said for the southeast quarter. That left the airport owners periodically responding with a proverbial "shrug of the shoulders" to economic development requests involving the siting of aviation companies. By 1994, LWS was virtually built out with no room to grow.
  - b. Gun club: The Lewiston Gun Club had occupied the south side of the airport since the late 1960's. A combination of events and conditions seemed to indicate its time as a tenant was slowly drawing to a close:
    - (1) Knowing LWS was running out of land suitable for aviation development, the FAA considered a gun club an incompatible land use and began to put pressure on the airport owners to terminate their relationship with the gun club.
    - (2) The post-9/11 environment made the gun club an incompatible land use in the eyes of the Transportation Security Administration. It, too, began to put pressure on the airport owners to terminate their relationship with the gun club.

- (3) The gun club was not paying anything close to market value for its use of the land, a situation that began to generate hard feelings with other land developers.
  - c. Usable land: Even without the gun club's presence, the south side was not usable because:
    - (1) The elevation of the land was significantly higher than the runway environment. To be usable, several million cubic yards of rock and dirt would need to be blasted and relocated to bring the level of the south side down to that of the airfield.
    - (2) There was no sewer, water, electrical, communications, or aviation infrastructure (taxiways and apron) to support development.
  - d. Earthwork: In about 2004, an opportunity arose to accomplish the earthwork mentioned above. In an unrelated move, the FAA was requiring the airport to create a safety area, a level 1,000-foot overrun off the departure end of runway 26. That would require huge quantities of material, since the existing terrain dropped off a cliff to a 1,500 foot shelf approximately 500 feet below—directly above the Country Club addition. But the fill material was available on the south side. So with FAA funding, local contractors blasted the rock and moved it to raise the shelf at the end of the runway, thus curing the FAA's safety area concern and leveling out a section of land for the airport's future aviation business park.
  - e. Infrastructure development: After losing out on an opportunity to even bid on the prospect of a business jet manufacturer looking for a location, the airport owners simultaneously applied for a federal Economic Development Administration grant and a block grant from the Idaho Department of Commerce. The grants came in at almost \$2 million, which enabled the airport owners not only to finish the previously described earthwork to create a sizeable amount of developable land on the south side, but also to install a water and sewer "backbone" along with conduits for dry utilities and telecommunications and to clean up the lead remaining after the gun club vacated the land.
  - f. As of this writing, the Airport Authority is designing the last of the infrastructure necessary to begin initial development of the south side, opening the way for the next generation of business aircraft and new aviation businesses to bed down and call LWS home.
3. Creation of an airport authority: By 2010, several branches of the federal government along with agencies in the state government, the airport owners and private businesses were investing millions annually in LWS. The regional airport appeared to be a going concern. That set the stage for political rivalries and jealousies to taint communications between the airport owners: the city and the county. The City of Lewiston, which had administered airport affairs for decades, wanted to retain control over an asset that contributed millions to the local economy, while Nez Perce County sought increased control and accountability in return for its contribution to the funding. Huge internal political conflict spilled out into daily airport affairs. Accusations of financial improprieties even reached the Federal

Aviation Administration, which conducted a financial investigation. The complaints and allegations were eventually cleared, but not before the city and county agreed to create a new form of governance to reduce political squabbles over the airport. Thus, in October 2010 the Lewiston-Nez Perce County Regional Airport Authority was born. Characterized by an independent governing board of commissioners with specified areas of expertise, the Authority is—as Chairman William V. McCann Jr. put it—long on innovation and short on bureaucracy. During its first years of existence, the Authority cut wasteful spending and created enough efficiency that it was able to fund maintenance of the main parking lot (which had *never* received *any* maintenance), crack-sealing of the entire length and breadth of runway 12-30, replacement of *all* the carpet in the terminal building and installation of a rest room in the secured boarding area.

4. Threat of tower closure: Politics on a national scale threatened to close the Lewiston air traffic control tower in 2013. Even though the facility had, within the previous five years, been designated as the best contract tower in the nation, earning the coveted Willie F. Card Memorial Award, it was caught up in a squabble between the administration and Congress that could have dismantled a key component of the national air traffic control system. As ludicrous as it sounded, there were days on end when it appeared that closure would actually take place. With help from the Friends of the Airport, the City of Lewiston and Nez Perce County, the Airport Authority engaged in a heavy lobbying effort aimed at saving its tower. The Authority board joined with dozens of other airport owners in a lawsuit. At the last minute, just before it became too late to turn back, the federal government reversed itself and found funding to save the program. The Lewiston tower remains open today.
5. Delta service: After decades of seeing air carriers come and go—in what amounted to a virtual revolving door at the boarding ramp—LWS began to develop a reputation for inconsistent airline service. It didn't seem to matter whether the carriers were independent airlines or nationally recognized names; they would open for business one month and be gone the next. Partnering with Valley Vision, the City of Lewiston and Nez Perce County, the airport entered into an innovative program that successfully recruited Delta Airlines service to the Valley in 2008. Although Delta initially received economic help to cover its cost of locating to the Valley, it soon was economically viable.
6. Remodeling and upgrading the terminal building: By 1994, the LWS terminal building was beginning to look quite long in the tooth and was unable to adequately accommodate customers with disabilities. Even minor remodeling projects became major because of outmoded sewer and water systems, household-grade heating and air conditioning systems and the presence of hazardous materials, such as lead paint and asbestos, in the original sections built in the 1950's. So, in 1995, half of the building was shut down. All airline business was conducted out of the remaining half while contractors gutted the other, removing everything down to the bare concrete foundation and walls. When the contractor finished the first half, business moved and the contractor completed the second half. It was the first comprehensive remodeling of the building since the 1950's, and it brought the

facility into compliance with contemporary building and safety codes—not to mention providing amenities (such as a baggage carousel) that passengers and customers had come to expect at a modern airport.

7. Restaurant decision: One of the original (if not *the* original) airport restaurateurs, Virgil Adair, complained in October 1963 that the decision of West Coast Airlines to change its schedule and use larger aircraft resulted in significant blocks of time with no one in the terminal building. Virgil began making plans to close his restaurant, a situation the *Lewiston Morning Tribune* called a “crisis.”

From that day until the 50th anniversary in 1994, a succession of restaurateurs arrived at and soon departed from the LWS terminal building, citing the evolution of schedules and aircraft as an insurmountable obstacle to restaurant success. At one point in the 1980’s, LWS handled more than 50 flights per day. Granted, they were with 19-passenger aircraft, but the high frequency of flights meant that people *were* coming and going throughout most of the day.

After 9/11, the types of aircraft in use, the airline schedules and the time allotted for check-in and security screening of passengers changed so significantly that the Authority board actually considered whether a restaurant should be a part of its business plan. The last restaurateur closed his operation in 2010. The same year, the Board decided to repurpose the floor space once used for the restaurant kitchen and part of the dining area. No consideration has been given to a restaurant since that time.

8. Continued evolution of small-city air service—part of the evolution of the American air service system: This is a “history-repeating-itself” story. The initial airline service in Lewiston worked because of a minimal regulatory (think safety and system regulations) environment, and because the aircraft and airline companies were small and appropriate to the market. They were able to continue service regardless of their underlying economic viability because the federal government subsidized them and regulated them to a minute detail. An airline grew, acquired larger aircraft, grew some more, acquired even larger aircraft, and then grew some more without regard to whether it could be a going concern if the federal subsidy ever stopped. Zimmerly became Empire which became West Coast which became Air West which became Hughes Airwest which became Republic which became Northwest, which eventually was absorbed into Delta. In 1978, Congress economically deregulated the airline industry, and the handwriting was on the wall. The subsidies would end and the airlines would—for the most part—have to survive as private companies. They were in charge of their own economic destiny, free to move into or out of markets.

With that, service to many of the smaller communities (read Lewiston-Clarkston) proved to be financially unviable with the large aircraft of the day. Consequently, the large airline serving Lewiston, Republic, left and was replaced by new, start-up air carriers with smaller aircraft better suited to the market. The list of names of the start-up carriers that rushed to fill the void left by Republic’s departure is huge: Horizon, Empire, Cascade, Big Sky, Mesa, SkyWest and Sun Valley Air, to name a few.

That's where history begins to repeat itself. As the market matured and the weaker new carriers were winnowed out, the survivors began to see more opportunities. With no federal regulatory agency to tell them they could *not* enter a new market, they entered markets aggressively.

Horizon and SkyWest grew. They started off with smaller aircraft (9 to 19 passengers), but as they grew they needed larger aircraft to accommodate more customers, so they moved toward equipment with seating capacities in the range of 30 to 40 passengers. The more passengers they carried, however, the more demanding the federal safety regulations became. That raised costs, which increased the drive to grow, and before long, these originally small "new" carriers were flying "small" (50-70 passenger) jets and high-tech turboprops in the 70-passenger range.

As the strong airlines grew, the less innovative, less profitable ones disappeared. But in order to keep the efficiency of operations high, the companies could no longer schedule 50 flights per day. They reduced frequency to three to four flights per day, and they allied themselves with national, name brand products. Horizon's logo disappeared, replaced by Alaska Airlines. The SkyWest name isn't visible, but Delta is. That brought some comfort and stability to small communities.

But when those communities wanted to "fill out their flight schedule" with another airline, they found there weren't any, or at least their choices had become very narrow. USAir was gone. So were Continental, Eastern, Northwest, Western, America West...the list goes on. Today, the smart community is one that first takes care of the airline service it has before going in search of additional service.