

Wilbur Municipal Airport

What makes an infrastructure improvement an asset to a town? Some would appear obvious- sewer, water, and roads are needed for the town's existence and growth. Others may not be so obvious such as public art and bike paths. Public art, to some, adds beauty and depth to a town, but not so with everyone. Bike paths have been claimed by some to take dollars away from road construction with no benefit but this is argued by the proponents that it provides safety and an alternative transportation mode, thus saving fuel. In other words something being an asset is "in the eye of the beholder".

An airport is one of the infrastructure improvements that some claim fall under the latter in that they don't necessarily provide obvious benefits. If the town and airport are large enough to support air carrier service the benefit is rather obvious. In the case of general aviation airports that many small towns such as Wilbur have as part of their infrastructure not everyone understands the economic opportunities that these airports can provide.

The Wilbur Municipal Airport does provide an economic tangible in that an agricultural oriented business is one of the tenants at the airport that brings economic dollars to the community. This aerial spray application business covers a 30 mi. radius around Wilbur, covering 142,000 acres/year. This contributes to better crop yields, thus more dollars to the local farmers which in turn a portion are spent locally. The airport also provides some intangible benefits to the town in that a safe, well-maintained airport provides opportunities such as Life Flight being able to land more safely, providing medical assistance and transport to injured citizens; provide fuel for firefighting aircraft and logging helicopters, such as is the case at Wilbur; provide recreational visitors access; pilot training opportunities and the dollars spent for construction improvements at the airport brings sales tax return dollars to the town.

Improvements to the airport obviously come at a cost. Airports are similar to highways in that they are partially funded by federal dollars through the Transportation Trust Fund. The highway side of these funds is generated by gas/diesel tax whereas the airport side funds are generated by a fuel tax on aircraft fuel sold throughout the country. The airport funding is administrated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) through the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). Funding in Washington State is also provided by the State Aeronautics Division with their funding being supported by gas tax and aircraft registration. Unlike funding for other infrastructure such as sewer and water, the airport funding comes from these user taxes.

The AIP funding is one of the only funding sources for sponsors that currently require only a 10 percent sponsor match with the AIP providing 90 percent. This compares to the roadway funding which is currently at 80/20. The State of Washington, Aeronautics Division supports leveraging their limited funds by providing a percent of the matching funds to sponsors for the federal grants with an emphasis on pavements. They currently are aggressive at providing a 2.5 percent match on projects with a current limit of \$250,000.

The Town of Wilbur has been proactive as a sponsor of the airport and since 2003 has completed a Master Plan to improve the airport and bring it to FAA Standards, thus increasing safety to the users of the airport.

Since completing the Master Plan, the town has purchased land, improved the runway by widening and lengthening it to standards, added a parallel taxiway, purchased updated snow removal equipment instead of using the town's equipment, constructed a building to house the snow equipment, and constructed hangar taxiways. In addition an Automated Weather Observation System (AWOS) is slated to be installed this year. The AWOS will allow the town to lower the visibility minimums required to land an aircraft at the airport and facilitate the authorization of a published GPS approach into the airport making access more available in inclement weather.

The total cost of this work was \$4,919,437. Because the town was proactive with moving forward with the design elements of the projects, it put them in a position to have a shovel-ready project which included the runway widening and lengthening and approximately 2/3 of the parallel taxiway. This allowed them to qualify for the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds, or stimulus funding, that the federal government provided in 2009. This construction money was made available as a 100 percent grant, therefore the construction of the runway and 2/3 of the parallel taxiway were at no cost to the Town of Wilbur. Prior to 2012, the AIP funding was at 95 percent federal and 5 percent sponsor. Wilbur also utilized the state matching funds as well as Lincoln County Economic Development (LCED) funds to assist on their portion of the match. The attached chart shows that being progressive and proactive has allowed the developments at the airport at a cost of \$38,230, or 0.78 percent of the total cost, to the Town of Wilbur. This investment has improved safety at the airport, brought it to current standards and increased the economic development opportunities the airport can bring to the community.

As stated earlier, the fixed base operator (FBO) that operates the ag-spraying operation at the airport contributes to the airport's overall impact of over \$1,000,000 to the community. This fixed base operator has been able to expand operations due to improvements and remain a viable business. The hangar taxiway now gives Wilbur additional hangar lease area for hangar construction bringing the opportunity for further revenue into the airport.

The AIP funding provided by the FAA includes a list of 26 grant assurances that the town is required to comply with. Some of these assurances are fairly straight-forward in that they restrict sole source businesses, discrimination and other normal federal requirements related to loans and grants. The key elements with AIP funding are that the airport must be maintained and any monies generated by the airport must be spent at the airport.

The AIP, as its name implies, is only available to improve and maintain airports due to the dollars being generated by airport users. This is accomplished through various pots of money that are available to airports with in the grant program. The two major ones are entitlement funds and discretionary funds. The discretionary funds are available to all qualifying airports and are intended for large projects. The entitlement funds are available to air carrier airports, such as Spokane International, Pullman-Moscow Regional Airport, Walla Walla Regional Airport, and the Tri-Cities Regional Airport on a sliding scale-as their passenger

facility charge (PFC) income increases the amount of entitlements decreases. For general aviation airports, such as Wilbur, the entitlement dollars amount to \$150,000 per year for qualifying airports, with the ability to hold these funds for up to three years, thus allowing larger \$600,000 projects every 4 years. These funds do qualify for maintenance of the pavements at the airport, thus helping the small airports comply with the grant assurance on maintaining the airport. Last year's funding included some dollars for essential periodic maintenance that helps keep the runway and taxiway pavements from deteriorating at an accelerated rate. The construction at the airport over the years to the tune of almost \$5,000,000 has mostly been constructed by local contractors. The dollars spent have kept the contractors viable and allowed one to expand his operations. The ARRA dollars did allow for increased employment even though it was limited to the time of construction, but it had the further benefit of keeping the contractor for those projects viable and allowed him to continue operations. Those construction projects also brought cascading dollars into the town in that some of the help hired for the projects were obviously not local and spent dollars at local campgrounds, motels, and restaurants. This cascading effect had a substantial impact on the Town of Wilbur.

Overall, the airport provides not only tangible, economic opportunities, it also, due to the upgrades and improvements, has the ability to provide opportunities for recreational visits, first strike aerial fire control, air ambulance missions and enhanced pilot training year round. Whether or not these opportunities are viewed as a viable benefit to the citizens of Wilbur is, as they say, in "the eye of the beholder".

WILBUR AIRPORT PROJECT COSTS

Grant	Project	Amount	FAA	Town	LCED Fund	State
AIP-03/04	Land Purchase	\$216,125.00	\$205,325.00	\$5,400.00	\$0.00	\$5,400.00
AIP-07	RW /TW Design	\$285,223.00	\$270,961.00	\$10,262.00	\$4,000.00	\$0.00
AIP-06	RW Construction	\$2,211,899.00	\$2,211,899.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
AIP-08	TW Ph 1 Construction	\$871,394.00	\$871,394.00	\$0.00	\$0.00	\$0.00
AIP-09	TW Ph 2 Construction	\$700,384.00	\$665,364.00	\$6,703.00	\$11,700.00	\$16,617.00
AIP-10	Snow Plow & Building	\$178,979.00	\$170,030.00	\$2,337.00	\$6,612.00	\$0.00
AIP-11	Hangar TW/AWOS	\$455,433.00	\$409,889.00	\$13,581.00	\$11,809.00	\$20,154.00
Total		\$4,919,437.00	\$4,804,862.00	\$38,283.00	\$34,121.00	\$42,171.00

Town of Wilbur's percent of total cost 0.78%