

## From the Business First

[:http://www.bizjournals.com/louisville/stories/2008/08/04/story5.html](http://www.bizjournals.com/louisville/stories/2008/08/04/story5.html)

SUBSCRIBER CONTENT: Aug 4, 2008, 12:00am EDT

# Turbulent times: Bowman Field tries to stop exodus of flights

Kevin Eigelbach  
Staff Writer

The numbers look troubling. From 1987 through 2006, the number of takeoffs plus landings at Louisville's Bowman Field fell 48 percent, from 197,037 to 101,813.

Although the number of planes kept there is increasing, they're not being flown as much.

That trend, which is mirrored at general aviation airports across the country, could pose problems for a beloved icon of Louisville aviation.

"People are passionate about Bowman Field, whether they're a first-time visitor or one of these old guys with all kinds of stories to tell," said Eric Potempa, manager of **Louisville Executive Aviation** LLC, which does aircraft fueling, cleaning and storage at the field.

Although everyone involved wants to see the airport as busy as its heyday during World War II, Potempa said, they can't agree on how to make it happen. Some aspects of the problem, such as the high price of aviation fuel, are out of their control, he said.

"To a certain extent, our challenges are macroeconomic, and we're swimming upstream," he said.

## Jets of the future

Enter the jets of the future — very light jets, which cost \$2.5 million to \$3 million and can carry four to six people on a 1,500-mile trip at 400 mph.

They will give small and medium-sized corporations the same safety and technology that bigger corporate jets have but at less cost, said Skip Miller, executive director of the **Louisville Regional Airport Authority**, which owns Bowman Field.

The only way to keep takeoffs and landings above 100,000 annually at Bowman is to get more planes based there, he said, and he believes that very light jets are those planes.

The 100,000 figure is important because if usage falls below that number, the **Federal Aviation Administration** begins to consider not staffing an airport's control tower. Last year, the number fell to 96,000, Miller said.

The FAA has not said anything yet to the authority about not manning the tower, Miller said. If the FAA decided not to man the tower, it probably would pay the authority to staff it, he said.

But losing federal air traffic controllers would cause the airport's insurance premiums to rise, he said.

## **Making room for the future**

There's no doubt that the very light jets are coming, Potempa said, but it remains to be seen how successful they will be.

"They're brand new, and only a handful are flying right now," he said. "The data is not there in terms of operating costs."

Miller wants to build new hangars just west of a series of hangars along Dutchmans Lane that date from the 1940s or 1950s, move the planes housed in the old hangars into the new hangars, and then knock down the old hangars and put up hangars for very light jets.

The airport authority's board of directors has not yet agreed on that plan. But in June, the board did approve a raise in hangar rent of 20 percent to 26 percent, depending on the hangar. Miller said the increase would cover the cost of replacing the old hangars.

The rent increase, which takes effect in February, didn't sit well with some of the people who house their aircraft at the field.

About 20 of them showed up to protest the decision at the board's June meeting, and one of them, authority board member Norm Risen, left the meeting early and later resigned from the board.

## **Driving planes away**

The rate increases would encourage pilots to move their planes to other local airports, such as **Clark County Regional Airport** near Sellersburg, Risen predicted. They are the latest in a series of moves that Miller has made that have the effect of driving away smaller planes, he said.

"What they want is the big-buck guys in there, they don't want the little guys," agreed Don Higgins, a member of the ad hoc group Friends of Bowman. "They would just as soon the piston people (who pilot piston-engine, propeller-driven planes) go away."

Sport and personal flying enthusiasts own the bulk of the planes stationed at the airport, Miller said, and the authority certainly doesn't want to drive them away. That's why, every year, the authority spends about \$1.5 million in federal funds and between \$200,000 and \$500,000 of its operating funds on Bowman Field, he said.

But he does want to broaden the customer base by adding the very light jets, a move that he said would benefit all users.

Higgins and his partner have decided to move their Cessna 310 from Bowman to the Capital City Airport in Frankfort. There, they can pay \$160 in rent monthly instead of \$442, for essentially the same hangar, he said, and save themselves more than \$3,000 a year.

The authority could renovate the old T-hangars for about \$55,000, Higgins said.

The airport could maintain them as a low-cost option for plane owners, he said, and build hangars

for jets on two large, grass-covered areas on the northwest corner of the airport property.

But Miller said the hangars require more than the sandblasting, painting and sealing that \$55,000 would cover. They need hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of renovations, which the authority would have to redo in 10 years, he said.

Miller doesn't believe that raising the hangar rents will prompt a mass exodus of planes, he said, because hangar rent is still a minor cost of owning an airplane.

### **Bowman Field**

**Owner:** Louisville Regional Airport Authority

**Total acreage:** 426, bounded by Taylorsville Road, Pee Wee Reese Drive, Dutchmans Lane, Cannons Lane and Seneca Park

**Runways:** Two. Runway 6-24 is 4,357 feet long and Runway 14-32 is 3,579 feet long

**Number of planes hangared there:** 366, up from 260 in the late 1990s

**Opened:** In 1920, by A.H. Bowman and Robert H. Gast

Annual economic impact: Nearly \$47 million, according to a 2005 study

**Distinctions:** Longest continuously operating general aviation airport in the United States. Busiest airport in the country during World War II. Along with Clark County Regional Airport in Sellersburg, Ind., one of two official reliever airports for Louisville International Airport.

**General aviation includes:** Sport flights, personal flights and corporate flights, but not commercial airline flights

Web site: [www.flylouisville.com/bfa](http://www.flylouisville.com/bfa)

Send comments to [keigelbach@bizjournals.com](mailto:keigelbach@bizjournals.com)