Meeting Notes – May 21, 2024

The LaFayette Rotary Club held its weekly meeting on 5/21/2024. Rotarian Dr. Abby Adams brought us our guest speaker, Dr. William (Bill) Hutto, executive director of the Auburn University Regional Airport. Accompanying Dr. Hutto was Levi Willoughby, an intern in Auburn University’s aviation management program.

The airport has been owned by Auburn University (AU) since 1939. It was privately owned prior to that. AU purchased the airport for $375.00. It consists of 435 acres and two runways and can accommodate business jets. Last year, the airport handled 95,000 take-offs and landings. It is the second busiest airport in the state, behind Birmingham. The airport broke its own record for its busiest day last year, with 609 take-offs and/or landings in one day. Planes from forty-seven of our fifty states have flown into or out of the AU airport. Every state except Alaka, Hawaii and New Mexico were represented.

Dr. Hutto spoke of the great support received from their community partners: the City of Auburn, the City of Opelika, and Lee County. Both their financial and political support are extremely important to the success of the airport. Members of each entity, along with others, serve on the airport’s advisory board. From a recent study, it was determined that the airport had a $24.4 million economic impact on our area. Statewide, the economic impact of all the state’s airports is estimated to be $4.9 billion.

Most of the flights in and out of the airport are civilian passenger flights, but there are some cargo flights as well. The airport is also used by the military, especially for helicopters, not just from Ft. Moore (formerly Ft. Benning), but also from Pensacola and other bases. The airport can accommodate the Gulfstream planes, 100 feet long and with a 100-foot wingspan. Sports teams, excluding football, utilizing the smaller passenger jets, use the airport frequently, as do businesses and individuals. The most planes on the ground at the airport on a game day has been in excess of 200. Typically, there are 150-160 planes on the ground at kick-off. The University owns two planes and those can be used, for a price, by any AU department. Because of the cost, the planes are used very selectively.

Two private flight schools are associated with the airport. RD Aire instructs students on how to pilot regular planes. Tier 1 Helicopters instructs students on helicopter flight. Enrollment of flight students in the School of Aviation is growing. There are currently 700-800 students wanting to learn to fly. Nationwide, females comprise only 6% of the airline industry. At AU, 21% of the aviation program is female. AU is hoping to increase that number. There are also many other jobs, other than piloting, available in the airline industry, such as airport administration, traffic control, and repair/maintenance.

From 2005-2021, $45 million in improvements have been made to the airport. Since 2021, the total has probably climbed close to $60 million. Recent improvements include a 10-unit T hangar; maintaining the main runway, including getting it grooved for better friction; pavement improvements; applying a sealcoat and re-marking; a corporate hangar; and a runway safety-area extension. The safety-area extension was made possible by purchasing land from the adjacent golf course, owned by the cities of Auburn and Opelika. The purchase price was $2.8 million, and the cities of Auburn and Opelika reinvested that money in golf-course improvements.

Upcoming projects include expanding the ramp and the addition of heli-pads. The AU Regional Airport is also applying for Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) controllers. Their application has been accepted and the FAA will supply up to six controllers to manage all the air traffic once the airport has a control tower. US House Representative Mike Rogers was able to secure $7.2 million in funding to build a control tower. In the meantime, the airport will use a mobile tower and will pay the FAA to staff the mobile tower for high-attendance AU football games.