



Page 1

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[Business Announcements](#)
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News

Maine airport on chopping block: Mayor says B19 used by just five people, so city can't 'subsidize' it

Meg Godlewski

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Citizens of Biddeford, Maine, may soon be voting on a referendum to close the local general aviation airport.

Biddeford Municipal Airport (B19) was built in the 1930s as a Works Progress Administration project. The airport, which sits on 126 acres about two miles from Biddeford, is owned by the city.

Over the years, its footprint has been shrinking while the community has crept closer, says Airport Manager Tom Bryand.

"When it was built, it had three runways," he said. "One of the runways was closed shortly after the airport opened, then the crosswind runway was closed in the 1950s to make way for the industrial park."

The one-two punch of a shrinking airport and encroaching homes has created friction between the townsfolk and the airport users, he noted.

According to Biddeford Mayor Joanne Twomey, the problem is that there is just a handful of residents who use the airport, but the rest of the community subsidizes it through taxes. A great many of the residents resent this, she said.

"We have senior citizens who can't afford heating oil, yet they are forced to support the airport through their taxes," she said. "The airport was built for recreation way back when, and today there are just five people who live in Biddeford who use it. Small planes come in and out, but just five people who live here keep airplanes here."

A quick glance at AirNav.com shows there are actually 42 aircraft based at the airport, which sees an average of 63 operations a day.

Twomey notes that pilots can use nearby Sanford Regional Airport (SFM), which is "just 20 minutes down the road."

"It is a much bigger airport — the President flies into there," she noted.

Twomey said it is difficult to justify the city's subsidization of the airport when it doesn't have the money to pay for a new high school, which the community desperately needs.

"When I go door to door campaigning, people tell me they don't want to pay for the recreation of just a handful of people," she said. "Can we afford to keep this airport open for just five people? It would be different if the airport was self supporting, but it isn't."

UNHAPPY NEIGHBORS

The loudest complaints come from the neighborhood that abuts the field.

"Those homes never should have been built there," she said. "Yes, they knew the airport was there when they moved in, but it has gotten much busier over the years."

The spectre of closure has been brewing for decades, said Bryand, partly due to the city's failure to protect the airport from incompatible land use.

He pointed out a "bunch of houses" that were built as close as 250 feet from the end of the runway. Photographs show homes so close to the airport that it resembles an airpark.

Alan Lyscars, the AOPA Airport Support Network volunteer, blames the encroachment of the homes on poor planning by former city officials who did not have the guidance of either the state or the FAA. "And now we have to live with it," he said.

Another problem: The city failed to get vegetation easements on the land. "We have all sorts of trees growing there and creating obstructions in what is supposed to be a Part 77 protected airspace," Bryand said. "Since there is no easement, we have no right to go in there and cut the trees."

The recent removal of trees between the houses and the airport was greeted with outrage from the neighbors, he added.

"Basically, all Hell broke loose," he said. "The trees were cut to comply with the 2005 Master Plan, which was created because the FAA told us, 'if you want to continue to get grants you need a Master Plan.'"

But according to Twomey, after the trees were cut residents allegedly learned that the FAA had not mandated their removal.

"Now when those people go into their backyards they can't enjoy them because of the noise from the airplanes," she said.

The lack of a fence around the airport is another issue, according to Bryand.

"We tried in previous years to get permission to build a fence, but the City Council voted it down, saying it would cut into the neighborhood too much," he said.

An Airport Commission was created to bridge the gap between the neighborhood and the airport. "Some commission members from the neighborhoods went prowling on the airport looking for violations, things like boats being stored in hangars," he said. "They reported them to the FAA, but it sort of backfired on them."

After the FAA inspection, officials told the city there was a problem with pedestrians on the airport and that a fence was needed to keep them out, Bryand recalled.

The Airport Commission was ultimately disbanded. "It was made up of pilots on one side and non-flying citizens on the other side and all they did was fight," he said. "They couldn't get anything done."

Now Bryand is trying to figure out where he will get the money to pay for a fence. "We can't get a grant to pay for it until we are in FAA compliance and we will not be in FAA compliance until we put up the fence," he said. "We have met with state and FAA officials and tried to show this to them."

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Another challenge is that any time something is done at the airport, from painting a hangar to a proposal for repaving, it is viewed as an attempt at expansion by opponents in the community.

"Back in 1985 they gathered enough signatures to pass a referendum that there would never be expansion at the airport," Bryand said. "But it didn't go into specifics on what that meant."

"The referendum in 1985 threw a scare into the community," Lyscars agreed. "People didn't want the airport to become a feeder for the airport in Portland because they worried about jets coming into Biddeford. The tenor of the referendum is no expansion, period. But in the last 23 years general aviation has changed. We now have Light Sport Aircraft and Very Light Jets. We need to let folks in southern Maine

know that the airport is an economic engine and that GA is a wave coming at us that we can either grab or not."

Even if the current referendum to close the airport is approved by voters, closure will not be a quick or inexpensive process, according to Twomey.

"There are outstanding grants — we are talking about millions of dollars — and we will have to buy back hangars," she said. "But if we continue to take money from the FAA we will continue to have to match those funds. We have a moral obligation to invest in our schools, but the airport continues to drain funds for the recreation of five people."

Twomey is skeptical of the need for an updated Airport Master plan, noting that it will likely lead to expansion — "The very thing that people say they do not want."

The fight has all the signs of being intense.

"The residents who don't want the airport are very well organized, as are the fly boys," she said.

Twomey could not say when the referendum would go before the people, noting that it was currently in the hands of the City Council for review.

For more information: BiddefordMaine.org.

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