

## **Houston County (MN) Airport (CHU) ... Some History**

Houston County Airport (CHU) was completed & dedicated in 1968 virtually unchanged from its present layout. County Commissioners took advantage of the opportunity offered by the Federal & State governments that promoted the building of such airports. CHU has status as an integral part of NPIAS (National Plan for Integrated Airport Systems).

The Federal & State governments view a strong network of local airports as an important part of the economic infrastructure. Local airports provide reliever & backup services to larger airports (UPS & FedEx land at CHU when La Crosse is fogged in), emergency access (medical helicopter pickup, search & rescue base), fast transport access (the 99's pick up & transport blood from blood drives; delivery of time critical agricultural parts), close & easy business access, public recreation opportunities, etc.

The State government will cost-share up to 70% of the cost of maintenance (snow plowing, mowing, electricity, repairs, etc.) and certain improvements.

The Federal government will cost-share 95% of the cost of approved airport developments. Airport owners can submit an Airport Layout Plan to the FAA for comprehensive development approval. These 95% dollars then get spent locally for a 5% County investment.

The money for this cost-sharing does NOT come from general tax dollars. Both the Federal & State governments have dedicated aviation trust funds for this purpose that derive their funds from aviation fuel taxes, aircraft registration fees, airline fees & other user fees.

Houston County Airport now derives income annually from State cost-shares mentioned above, lot leases, property taxes on hangars & cropland rental. The County generally breaks even annually when averaging this income and annual expenses over the years. But, while the County has done a good job of maintaining the airport, the infrastructure is aging dramatically. The runway structure is the same one that was laid down in 1968, 41 years ago!

## **The airport economic engine has started!**

The Houston County Economic Development Authority (EDA) first promoted the airport as an economic engine for Houston County. Information was sought by the EDA and with the help of those interested in aviation, found that there were significant amounts of accumulated Federal and State money available for airport development for Houston County! This resulted in the development of a comprehensive Airport Layout Plan (ALP) at no cost to Houston County. Needed maintenance, such as sealcoating the runway and apron was performed. Working with an airport consultant and MNDOT, the 24/7 fuel depot and heated restrooms were also installed at the airport at no cost to Houston County.

These improvements have attracted a business, Benson Technical Works, to the airport. The large "Murphy" hangar was sold to the Bensons providing more dollars to the County for airport development and provides continuing income from the land lease for the hangar.

The Houston County Flyers (HCF) is an organization for all aircraft and owners located at the airport. HCF donated and installed the arrival/departure building and sponsor the fly-in breakfast at the airport. HCF also paid for burying the power lines that were in the approaches to the runway. They also contributed to the NDB navigation aid for the airport. This year the Houston County Flyers and the airport users have offered \$3,375.00 to Houston County for one-half of the County's portion for the immediate implementation of an Environmental Impact Study for the new runway relocation.

Many members of the community are involved with the airport. The airport brings visibility for tourism, business travel and generates income for the businesses in the area. The County Commissioners and other local aviation interests have made some good decisions in the past economic growth of the airport. Upgrading the runway is required if the airport is going to continue to be an economic engine for Houston County. The improvements will enhance community economic growth and with modernized navigational equipment, such as the restoration of the Global Positioning System Instrument Approach, result in increased safety for aircraft and residents.