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Developing the Airpark: Part One

Heaven's Landing

GRANT BOYD

If the dozens of pages before and after this article in a quarterly publication specifically designed towards showcasing aviation-related properties are no indication, airparks are big business. As of today, there are several hundred of these property conglomerates surrounding runways of varying types throughout the United States (some in other parts of the world, as well), according to a variety of sources. Airparks vary in pricing, structure, and location; anywhere from million-dollar homes alongside multiple, paved runways in Florida, or modestly priced homes adjacent grass strips in Kansas.

The country has a wide selection of airparks, with such a variety that almost any pilot (and their plane) will feel right at home at any of them. The convenience of these airparks, often in our near areas with a high

population of pilots, is untouched. There isn't anything more convenient than having your plane at home, with a runway in your backyard-is there?

Unfortunately, alongside the quest for convenience comes the realities of life, with some aircraft owners possibly finding that an existing airpark (or airparks) don't meet their needs as well as they had hoped. For instance, perhaps they have a twin or small jet and the only local airpark has a short, unlit grass runway unsuited for their aircraft or hangar homes nearby are far too big for their family. This problem of not being able to find a suitable airpark does happen from time to time and can be caused by any combination of reasons, including: cost (lots, homes, HOA fees, etc.), location, inability to relocate to another town, amenities, runway type, neighbors, among several others, and can in extreme cases bring about the question of "why don't I just build my own airpark; one that fits all of my needs and desires?" Of course, this is only following a "yes" to the question "do I want to live at an airpark," which in of its self has a large subject of questions guiding one to arrive at an affirmative conclusion of

future hangar-home living.

So let's say you have decided an airpark with your own signature is more desirable than any you see on the market; what is next? Well, first, explore the concept in further detail to see whether it is feasible in your case, as well as learn from others who have done it. This will either confirm your current desire to make your own, but it may draw you back to flipping through *Aviators Properties* for your own.

"Build it and they will come," certainly was true for a ball field in rural Iowa, but does the concept remain true, when related to residential airparks? This article is part one of a three-part series that seeks to answer that question, as well as relay firsthand tips from the owners of existing, successful airparks in hopes of educating those who may toy with the idea of developing their own *Field of Dreams*.

To play devil's advocate a little, in regards to the question of, "why would I prefer to develop my own airpark rather than look for an open lot from these pages," Joseph Wortman, the owner of

Sullivan's Harbor Springs Airpark in picturesque Northern Michigan provides some words of caution and inspiration to those interested in exploring the concept, as he notes that "there are no guarantees of financial reward," but then goes on to say that "there are unique attributes, along with a passionate audience, that make the venture extremely fulfilling from a personal satisfaction standpoint."

Mike Ciochetti, who owns Heaven's Landing in the equally beautiful portion of mountainous Northeast Georgia also speaks to whether developing ones own airpark is quote unquote, "worth it." He says, "that all depends on how you quantify 'worth it'? It is more a labor of love than a truly profitable job. There are plenty of things that I could do to make more money, but I'm not sure I would have as much fun doing it. In my case I also have supplemental income from my other businesses. The development is not what allows me to own an airplane for sure."

In short, from these two experienced individuals, developing an airpark is difficult work, but it can be worth the large investment in time and money needed to make it successful. That is, if you have the motivation and steadfast commitment to create something bigger than yourself, without regard for the many challenges, then developing an airpark may be just the right project to consider undertaking.

If the commitment is there, then the next step is one that many may classify as the "fun" piece of airpark developing, a.k.a. when the proposed developer puts their dreams and goals on paper. Considerations for this step include: overall design concept, type of runway(s), association type, target audience, area appeal, airport amenities, and hundreds more. As sort of a dream fodder, look closer at Heaven's Landing and Sullivan's Harbor Springs Airpark for inspiration, as they combine all the pleasures required by their target customer looking for a higher end fly-in community, while still accounting for the realities and challenges of sales, construction, airport operations, and others.

Sullivan's Harbor Springs Airpark



The simplicity of a "back of the napkin" dream session can quickly amount to years of actual planning, prior to anything being built. Skipping the arduousness and nuances that are physically involved in the development process, but which will be explained in the next article-managing the airpark is just as challenging as constructing it.

Ciochetti, who manages Heaven's Landing primarily by himself but with the help of others on his staff, notes the following, "The telephone dictates life daily. It is truly a 'full time-full time' job. Planning anything is nearly impossible. The challenges are constant and ever changing. One must be ready for anything, and deal with all of it with a smile. Everyone seems to think that they are an expert in the field, yet very few in the field have flourished. It is a marathon, not a sprint, and if you expect to make a 'small' fortune doing it, then you better start with a 'large' one."

Of course, "the best way to make a thousand dollars in aviation is to start with a million" and airparks may be no exception. Asides from having ample means, there are several other things that are important to possess if someone is interested in developing an airpark. In Wortman's case, Sullivan's Harbor Springs is situated at an existing municipal airport supported by local and federal programs, so the ability to work alongside other, existing entities was paramount. In the case of this airpark,

private land adjacent the field was granted a rolling 25-year lease for access to the airfield, with each location set to have its own field access considerations. This, as well as other considerations, all must be set in stone prior to any dirt being moved.

Regarding this relatively unique situation, Wortman notes that it has been extremely important in his instance to work with the Airport Authority and help them to reach their goals. For example, efforts were made to spruce up the previously more run-down portion of the field where the residences are now located, as well as attracting pilots, airplanes, and investment dollars to KMGN. This mutually beneficial arrangement (airport, airpark, and tenants) is important to any development, as political and legal hurdles can be difficult to navigate in many jurisdictions. ■

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Continued on Part Two..

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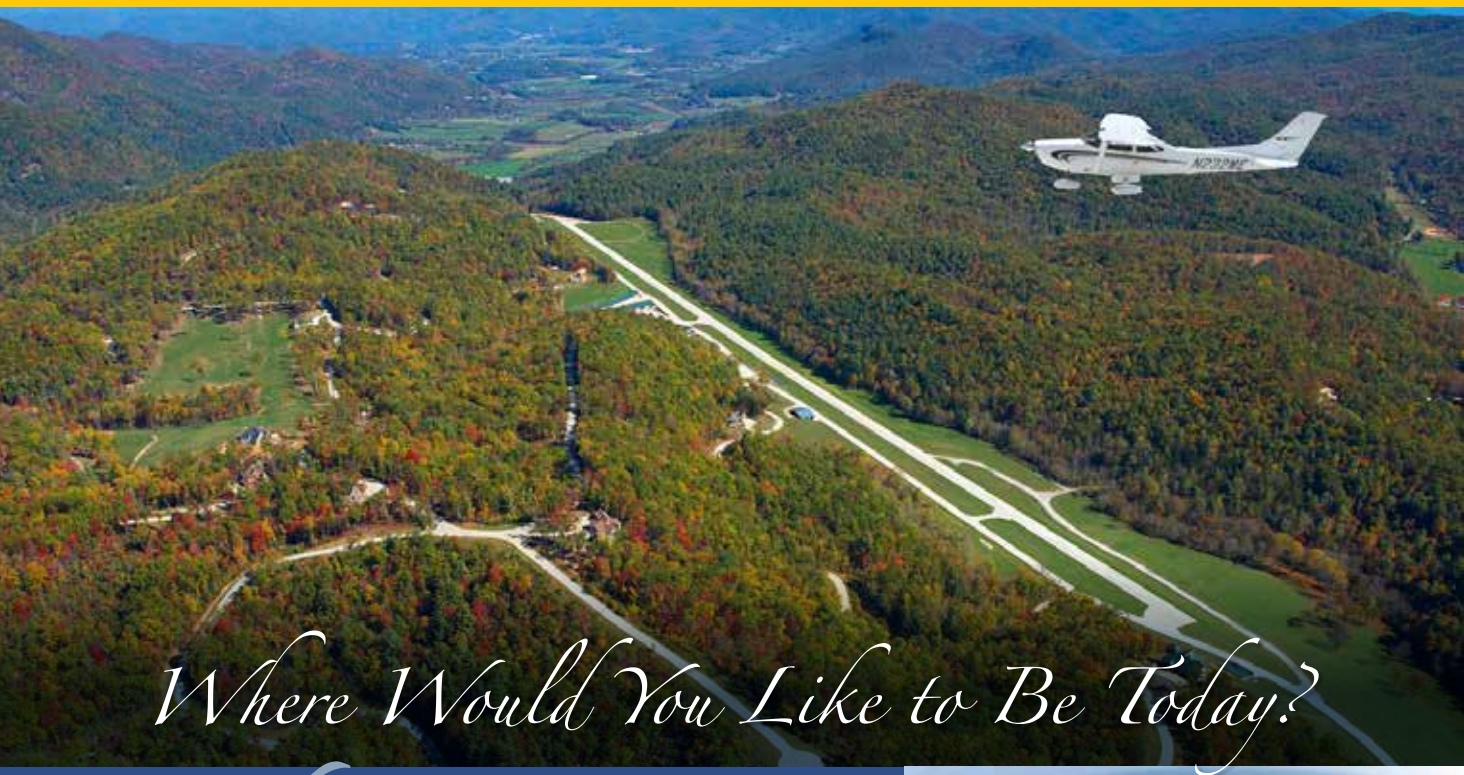


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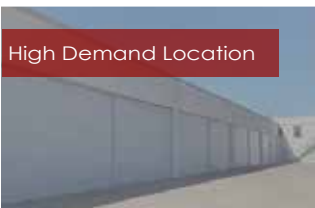
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