



CASE STUDY

AN AIRPORT OPEN HOUSE



AOPA AIRPORT SUPPORT
NETWORK

INTRODUCTION

This document presents a case study of a successful aviation open house event. While each airport is unique, and organizers would be responsible for tailoring activities for their community, this document describes how one airport invited the public to learn about aviation. Examining how the event is structured and learning the history that led to the event may provide ideas that other airports can borrow, adapt—or in some cases—avoid. It is offered here to stimulate thinking and encouragement to host an event at your airport.

PURPOSE

AOPA recommends that airports hold an open house periodically, to invite the public to discover some of activities that goes on there. Opening the doors to the non-flying world has numerous potential benefits including:

- Increase public awareness of the social and economic value the airport provides to the community it serves.
- Expose youth to careers that revolve around the airport, including piloting, airport or FBO management and operations, aircraft maintenance, air traffic control, etc.
- Provide the opportunity to see airplanes, up close and personal.
- Generate understanding of airport operations with the community to help address any concerns about noise, traffic patterns etc.

Since most airports are owned by local municipal governments, the understanding and good will generated from these sessions has the potential to pay big dividends when airport budgets, land use policies or decisions to expand the airport infrastructure are considered.

A secondary benefit is building good relationships among airport stakeholders. These events are typically put on by a group of stakeholders including airport management, aviation businesses, local airport support groups, EAA and/or Ninety Nines Chapters, etc. Working together on a positive event provides the opportunity to get to know each other and develop relations that carry over when potentially contentious issues, such as airport rate increases arise.

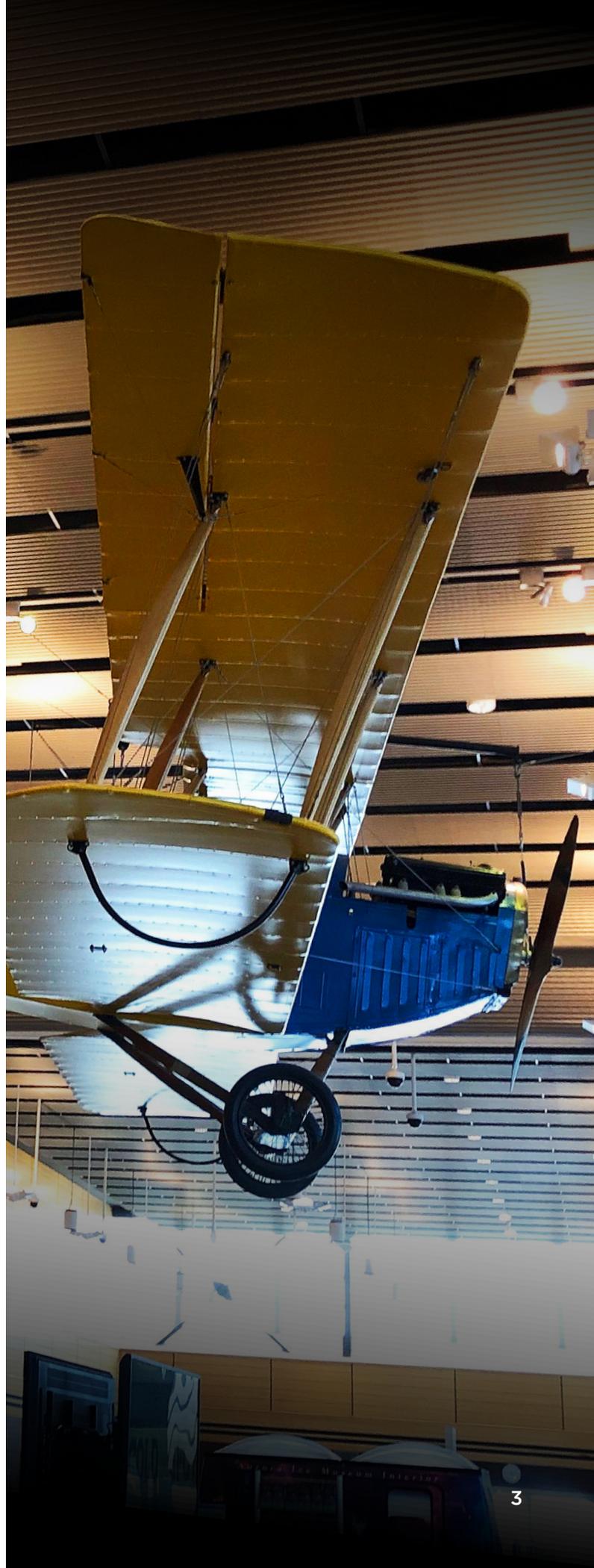
THE AIRPORT

Fairbanks International Airport (FAI) is home to a combination of airline, air cargo, commuter, corporate, and general aviation (GA) activity. FAI is located in the center of the state and provides services to some 50 communities across interior and northern Alaska. Many of these are not connected by road and depend on air transportation for primary access to their communities.

The west side of the airport has an 11,000 ft runway that sees jet traffic—mostly in support of passenger service that provides inter- and intrastate and international service. It is also home to a unique company that operates DC-6 and C-46 aircraft that supply freight and fuel hauling services.

The east side of the airport has a paved runway used by single and twin-engine aircraft, a gravel runway that supports ski-equipped aircraft in the winter, and a float pond for seaplane activity. Part 135 air taxi operations flourish there, along with several hundred private aircraft tied down on the ramp or protected in private hangars. Air taxi businesses, maintenance facilities, an avionics shop, and a tour operator are among the businesses that reside on the east side of the airport.

The airport is operated by the State of Alaska, Department of Transportation and Public Facilities. It is one of two international airports in the network of 237 state-owned airports. FAI also has a business group, the *Airport Operators Council*, with representatives of airport based businesses and groups to provide an informal interface with airport management. A second GA focused local airport group established by the AOPA Airport Support Network Volunteer, provides a voice for the GA stakeholders to interact with airport management.



BACKGROUND

For many years Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) Chapter 1129 in Fairbanks had been holding a pancake breakfast at the Civil Air Patrol's hangar. The leadership of EAA decided to try expanding the event, and in 2006, persuaded a fixed base operator (FBO) on the commercial (west) side of the airport to host the event. The FBO's hangar was used for the pancake feed and display tables, and an EAA Young Eagles program was staged on the ramp in front of the hangar, where youth were given a free introductory airplane ride. Advertising was largely by word of mouth, and well over a hundred people attended the event each year. At that time, it was largely the aviation community, with the addition of family and friends, in attendance. Admission was free, and proceeds from a pancake breakfast was used as a fund-raiser. After several years, the EAA Chapter experienced challenges in finding sufficient resources to host the event, and discovered that they spending as much as they were making on the pancake breakfast. They approached the Airport Operators Council (AOC), a longstanding organization of airport business managers, about taking over organization of the open house, as a means to continue what was becoming a popular event.

The AOC studied the situation, aided by AOPA's **Guide on holding an Airport Open House**, and decided to take on the challenge in 2012. Some changes were immediate. Perhaps most striking was the community support of the pancake breakfast as a fund-raiser. Under the AOC's management, the breakfast raised over \$2,000 that year, with proceeds going to fund aviation scholarships. More details on this activity are described below.

THE OPEN HOUSE TODAY

Fairbanks Aviation Day has grown over the past decade. In 2019, over 3,000 members of the public turned out for the one-day event, which is currently based in the University of Alaska Fairbanks Aviation Technology Program Facility. The university generously opens their hangar and grounds for the occasion. The pancake feed raised \$3,400 which continues to support aviation scholarships, and the public experienced a wide range of activities, many of which are listed below. The open house operates on a budget of approximately \$8,000, which is raised through sponsorships and the sale of exhibitor tables. Additionally, it is supported by in-kind contributions from aviation and community stakeholders, that greatly helps reduce direct costs. The list of activities that follows illustrates the nature of the open house. This is not to suggest that all airports would include these activities—but they are offered to stimulate ideas.



Free Flights for Youth

Initially, EAA provided this capability with volunteer pilots and aircraft under the umbrella of their national **“Young Eagles” Program**. Eventually as public participation increased, the demand outgrew the EAA Chapter’s ability to support the event. In recent years, three of the commercial Air Taxi’s based at the airport stepped in and provided their pilots, aircraft, and operations staff to run the program for the day (one of the significant in-kind industry contributions). While not an identical experience to the Young Eagles Program, 226 youth ages 8 to 17 received free introductory airplane rides in 2019.

Indoor Air Traffic Control Activity

This youth activity requires a hangar or large building with plenty of open space. The local Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) Safety Team has a scale model of an airport, approximately 70 by 25 feet in size when laid out on a hangar floor. It uses real-world runway markings and signs, designed for scenario-based training. In this application, however, a small 2x4 wooden “tower cab” was constructed, and staffed by controllers from the FAA control tower on the field. Youth, wearing N-numbered vests, get the experience of receiving taxi, take off, and landing instructions. Adult volunteers often “lead” the flight. This has proven to be very popular with children too young to go on the free airplane flights. This year 326 youth participated during the program’s six hours of operation.

Pancake Breakfast/Fundraiser

One of the anchor events is a pancake breakfast, which morphs into lunch service at mid-day. As previously described, the breakfast was one of the elements that initiated the open house. Having food at an event is often a draw which brings people together, provides a reason to come early or stick around longer, while waiting for a tour or free flight to start. EAA continues to supply the labor to cook and serve the pancakes. With connections from an airport food catering businesses, currently all the food supplies are donated. The the cash collected is all “profit,” and is split between EAA Chapter 1129 and the AOC, used to support aviation scholarships. This year the food service brought in \$3,442.





Aircraft Display

Letting people walk up to and inspect different types of aircraft has always been an attraction, both for those already in the aviation community as well as the public. This event hosts a display focuses on GA aircraft, however a retired Boeing 727 cargo jet, now owned by the university, is part of the show, and open for tours. Organized by staff at one of the GA aircraft maintenance facilities, a total of 28 aircraft were available for inspection. A number of those were attended by their owners, who allowed the public, particularly youth, to sit in the pilot seats. A new element added this year was a walking tour. A guide took small groups to examine a series of planes, starting with a Cessna 150, briefly explaining the functions and differences between selected aircraft. While only prototyped this year, this effort was very well recieved and will be expanded in future years.

Exhibitors

Inside the University's maintenance hangar, tables are set up and sold to businesses and organizations who wish to feature their products and services. These include airlines, air tour operators, a local aviation museum, civic groups, aviation organizations, etc. The FAA Flight Service staff set up a flight simulator for brief "flights." Another table is devoted to face-painting or balloon twisting, to entertain the younger set. Revenues from the sale of these tables help support the cost of the event.

Demonstrations

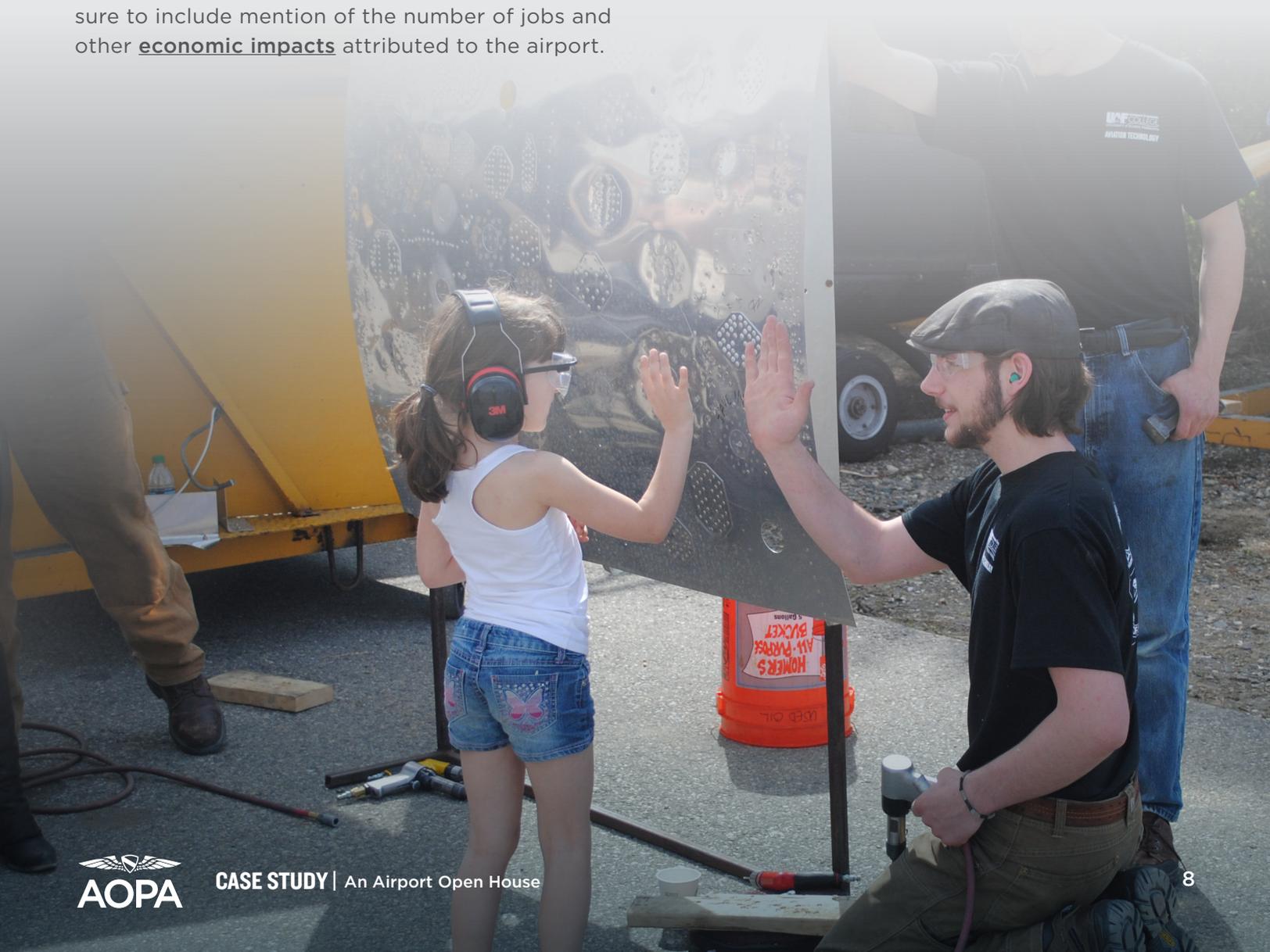
Outside the hangar, the university's maintenance program has workstations where people can try their hand at riveting or applying fabric to a control surface. Another division of the university is involved in Unmanned Aviation System operations and provided a drone simulation. These hands-on activities have been particularly popular with youth and introduce them to the maintenance and unmanned aspects of aviation.

Airport Tours

To provide exposure to the broader operational aspects of the airport, a local tour company provides use of their 24 passenger vans to support an “inside the fence” airport tour. Lasting almost an hour, the guided tour is led by a member of the airport operations staff and circumnavigates the GA and airline sides of the airport. Stops are made at a corporate FBO, continues across the ramp where airlines are being serviced, stops at an air cargo company that uses WW-II era propeller cargo aircraft, and a hangar where an experimental aircraft is under construction. Along the way the different businesses and facilities, including the FAA flight service station and air traffic control tower are discussed, while making sure to include mention of the number of jobs and other **economic impacts** attributed to the airport.

Scout Merit Badge Program

While not included in the 2019 event due to a scheduling conflict, in previous years a scout merit badge program has been held in parallel with the rest of the open house. A classroom in the facility is devoted to a series of presentations supported by the aviation industry describing aviation career opportunities. The Youth Flights and Air Traffic Control activities devote time for the scouting merit badge participants to meet their flight requirement and obtain a briefing on air traffic control. Typically, about 20 scouts earn aviation merit badges by piggybacking on activities already happening that day.



LESSONS LEARNED

Define the mission. Each event has its own nature and character. It is important to define the mission and audience for an open house. The current purpose statement for this event is:

To increase the awareness of the general public regarding the benefits aviation and Fairbanks International Airport bring to the Fairbanks community, region and state.

While many pilots attend this event, the target audience is the *general public*. Establishing that audience made it easier to evaluate the suitability of different elements to support the mission. Trying to serve too many audiences at once is a challenge, which may cause an event to lack focus.



Advertising to the Public

In the early years, the open house was largely promoted by word of mouth and hand made flyers distributed around the airport. The largest component of the budget for the event today (~75%) is in newspaper, radio, and social media advertising. Investing in the services of a graphic artist to create a consistent look and feel has helped the event establish an identity in the community. Using local event calendars and taking advantage of media public service announcements has also increased awareness, as the open house is competing with numerous other weekend community events happening concurrently. Attention to these details has played a key role in transforming this event from a few hundred to a few thousand participants.

Coordination with Airport Stakeholders

The event is planned by a volunteer organizing committee that holds monthly meetings during the six months leading up to the open house. Keeping communications flowing between the groups organizing each of the elements is essential to avoid having no-shows or cancellation of key components at the last minute.

Sponsorship

Over 90% of the funds raised to hold this event come from sponsorships. Sponsorship isn't just a matter of a business or organization giving money. It is about an exchange of value. In return for providing funding for the event, sponsors receive recognition in return. This event uses a tiered sponsorship level. A donation of \$250 or more gets an organization or business their logo on signage at the event, and in a thank-you ad published in the local paper. A \$500 donor receives in addition their logo on the event flyer, select newspaper ads, and (if they want it) a free table at the event plus two tickets to the pancake feed. Donors above \$2,500 receive those benefits plus an additional table, and a much larger logo on event posters and are included in all paid advertising. An aviation organization that is a 501(c)3 non-profit corporation collects the funds, allowing sponsors to claim tax benefits for their donations. A statewide aviation organization, the Alaska Airmen Association, provides the event insurance. To date, the \$500 level of sponsorship is the most popular, with many business and organizations making that cash contribution in addition to supplying tour busses, aircraft time, or other in-kind support.

Dealing with Growth

As the event has increased in popularity, it outgrew the initial facilities. More space was needed, so the event migrated from the FBO on the commercial west side of the field, with stringent security requirements, to the aviation school on the general aviation side of the airport with lower security requirements. Initially, event parking was just on the street, but as participation increased, a dedicated area had to be provided. Today, coordination with the airport police and traffic direction from the local Civil Air Patrol cadets or other school groups keeps parking under control.



BENEFITS

The primary purpose of an open house is to educate the public about aviation and show the value of the airport to your community. Exposing youth to aviation, piloting, maintenance, air traffic control, and the evolving world of unmanned aerial systems is important to recruiting future generations of aviation professionals. Increasing public awareness about the scope of businesses and industrial activity that take place at an airport may help recruit advocates when it comes to land-use or other policy issues that are decided at the local level. A more immediate benefit from this event is the working relationships that develop between the airport staff, businesses on the field, and the aviation groups that team up to host and support the event. The activity creates a spirit of cooperation and comradery that flows into many other aspects of daily operations, communications, and handling of issues at the airport, resulting in short- and long-term benefits.

AOPA encourages you to consider organizing an Open House at your airport!



AOPA has the document ***The Complete Guide to Holding an Airport Open House*** to help groups plan these events.