

# **Nut Tree Airport**

## **2007-2008 Solano County Grand Jury**

### **Reason for Investigation**

Under the authority of Penal Code section 925, the 2007-2008 Grand Jury elected to investigate and report on the operations of the Nut Tree Airport.

### **Grand Jury Actions**

- Interviewed Airport Manager, staff, advisory committee members and other individuals associated with the Nut Tree Airport
- Toured Nut Tree Airport
- Reviewed Solano County Advisory Board Principles and Policies adopted June 7, 2005
- Reviewed Nut Tree Advisory Committee meeting minutes
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport Master Plan, 1994
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport Standards for all Aviation Operations - May 3, 1994
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport Management/Operational Review - September 25, 2003 (Revised)
- Reviewed Emergency Response Plan
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport 2005 Airport Operations Services Manual
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport Minimum Operating Standards for Commercial Aeronautical Activity (Draft) March 2006
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport Utility Master Plan, First Draft, April 2007
- Reviewed Nut Tree Airport Rules and Regulations
- Reviewed Solano County Ordinances 721 and 781
- Reviewed Solano County Code Chapter 2.4, Airports and Aircraft

### **Background / Summary**

The Nut Tree Airport (Airport) is a general aviation airport located on 245 acres at 301 County Airport Road, Vacaville, California. It is one of approximately 19,000 such airports in the United States. The mission of the Airport is “to provide a safe, convenient, well-maintained facility for general aviation and business aviation use.” An estimated 65 percent of general aviation flights across the country are conducted for business and public services.

The Airport started as a dirt strip in the 1930’s when a local pilot made an emergency landing next to the eucalyptus grove on the Nut Tree Ranch. The former Nut Tree Restaurant owner constructed an improved airport in 1955. It became a popular destination during the height of the Nut Tree Restaurant’s success. It was also the home of the Vacaville Rotary Clubs’ Fly-ins and attracted a number of famous people including John Glenn, Jimmy Doolittle, Chuck Yeager and others. In 1968 the airport property was donated to Solano County.

Today, the Airport consists of one lighted and paved runway 4,700 feet long and 75 feet wide. The length of the runway was increased by 800 feet in November 2000.

Currently, there is no fixed base operator. A fixed base operator is a person, firm, or corporation under contract to serve as a concessionaire at an airport. An aviation branch of the Solano Community College operates a facility at the Airport for students working toward a certification as an Aeronautics-Avionics Technician.

There are 180 single engine aircraft, 12 multi-engine aircraft, four jets, and one helicopter based at the Airport. There are 61 T-Hangars (structures used to house small aircraft) with one primary month-to-month renter for each hangar. Hangars are used for aircraft storage only. Ninety-five tie downs are currently available, six large non-executive hangars, 36 private non-executive hangars and 13 corporate hangars and no shade ports.

According to the Airport Manager, in 2007 there were approximately 108,000 take-offs and landings. Caltrans uses a Larson-Davis acoustical counter to determine the number of take-offs and landings per year. The acoustical counter is placed next to the runway for approximately four months and an average use is calculated.

Recent improvements include a runway extension, re-alignment and enlargement of the taxiways, new airport apron and tie-down parking. A new environmentally friendly “wash-rack” area was installed and a new automobile parking lot as well as a wider entry road to the airport has been completed. New security fencing and an upgraded pilot lounge were completed in March 2007. Approximately 18 acres of land were purchased for the expansion just north of the airport.

In the past, the Nut Tree train took pilots landing at the Airport to dine at the Nut Tree Restaurant. This made the Airport a tourist destination. Since the original restaurant closed, the train no longer runs between the Airport and the newly redeveloped Nut Tree.

Leases for business tenants and corporate hangars are based on individual agreements. The amount of jet fuel sold has risen from 129,692 gallons in 1999 to 200,764 gallons in 2007. During the same period, the sale of fuel used by small piston driven aircraft fell from 115,272 gallons in 1999 to 72,885 gallons in 2007.

Nationally, private pilot use seems to be falling while corporate use is increasing. The reason for this change includes the increased cost of aircraft, increased cost of fuels, increased operating costs, changes in the luxury tax on aircraft and the effects of September 11, 2001. It is now more expensive for the private pilot to fly for pleasure and faster for the business travelers to use private aircraft. The shift from private pilot to business use has impacted the long time users of the airport.

The change in focus at the Airport has created some uncertainty about the future. As a result, there is an atmosphere of mistrust and unfounded rumors abound. For example, a recent allegation of water in the fuel created concern. The Airport management took the problem very seriously and tested the fuel numerous times to verify that the rumor was false and the fuel was safe.

Businesses at the Airport include Power Aviation Services and CalStar Shock/Trauma Air Ambulance Services. Power Aviation Services provides service and maintenance for fixed wing and rotary wing aircraft. The Air Ambulance Services is a non-profit corporation that provides emergency rescue services. They are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

In 2003, the Board of Supervisors contracted with Aviation Management Consulting Group to conduct a management and operational review of the Airport. The scope of the review included:

- Conducting a market assessment
- Conducting a management review
- Assessing overall operations, service delivery, and management practices
- Developing a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats analysis

Many of the recommendations made by Aviation Management Consulting Group were implemented by the current Airport Manager. Those that have **not** yet been implemented include:

- Completing a new Nut Tree Airport Master Plan
- Developing a community and tenant relations/communications plan
- Developing and implementing an Airport Strategic Business Plan
- Contracting with a fixed base operator
- Developing vision and values statements

### **Staff**

The Airport has four full time employees. They include one airport manager, one administrative assistant, and two maintenance workers. Maintenance workers service the building and grounds.

### **Budget**

The Airport is a self supporting enterprise organization. Funding comes from ground leases, hangar and office rentals, building rentals, and state and federal grants. The total revenue for fiscal year 2006-2007 was \$4,367,316. In 2005, to accelerate airport capital improvements, the County loaned the Airport \$1.5 million. This loan is being paid back with interest.

### **Aviation Advisory Committee**

The Solano County Aviation Advisory Committee (Advisory Committee) was originally formed in October 1969 by an ordinance adopted by the Solano County Board of Supervisors. The ordinance was amended in December 1971 to broaden the membership and increase the powers and duties to include the planning responsibilities of an airport land use commission. Recently, the Advisory Committee was divided into two committees. The Advisory Committee now deals only with airport operations and the new Airport Land Use Commission deals with land use. This division of responsibility and new members on the Advisory Committee resulted in more active involvement in the operations of the Airport.

The Advisory Committee is a seven member group appointed for a term of four years. Members are appointed based on the following qualifications: recreational pilot, business

pilot/owner/aircraft user, area resident, Pilots Association member, business representative, fixed base operator or airport land use commission member. One purpose of the Advisory Committee is to advise the Board of Supervisors on policy matters pertaining to the operation and management of the Airport and any other matters as the Board of Supervisors may from time to time request relating to the Airport. Other purposes include reviewing and making recommendations regarding plans and policies for airport safety; reviewing and assisting in the preparation of the airport master plan and other related plans and documents; and submitting to the Board of Supervisors an annual report of goals, accomplishments and recommendations. In addition, all boards, commissions and committees in the county are required to adopt by-laws and, unless otherwise directed, to provide the Board of Supervisors with agendas, minutes and reports. All members are appointed by the Board of Supervisors.

The Advisory Committee meets the fourth Thursday in January, April, July and October at 7:00 pm in the Airport's conference room. The public is invited to attend the Committee's quarterly meetings. Special meetings are held as necessary.

### **The Friends of the Nut Tree Airport**

The Friends of the Nut Tree Airport was recently formed to advocate for the Airport by promoting the Airport's interests to local government agencies and the general public. It also addresses issues that could potentially threaten the Airport such as noise complaints, incompatible land use and encroachment issues. The group also educates the public about the value of general aviation.

### **Findings and Recommendations**

**Finding 1** - The focus of general aviation is changing from recreation to business aviation.

**Recommendation 1** - The management of the Nut Tree Airport needs to respond to the trends of the future to ensure the survival of the Airport. This includes developing better communications between management, pilots and the public.

**Finding 2** - The Nut Tree Airport Master Plan is not completed.

**Recommendation 2** - Efforts to fund and prepare the Nut Tree Airport Master Plan should continue. The plan should include a strategic business plan and an airport marketing plan.

**Finding 3** - A formal connection between the Nut Tree Airport and the redeveloped Nut Tree does not exist.

**Recommendation 3** - The Nut Tree Airport could attract more aircraft if those landing could easily access dining and shopping facilities. For this reason, efforts should be made to provide better access or transportation to the redeveloped Nut Tree.

**Finding 4** - The Solano County Aviation Advisory Committee is now taking a more active role though there is still confusion about its relationship with the Board of Supervisors.

**Recommendation 4** - The Solano County Aviation Advisory Committee should take a more proactive role with the Board of Supervisors and consistently provide agendas, meeting minutes and reports.

**Finding 5** - The Fixed Base Operator is a voting member of the Nut Tree Airport Advisory Committee.

**Recommendation 5** - The Nut Tree Airport Advisory Committee should be an independent body free of influence by those who could benefit financially from decisions of the committee. For this reason, the Fixed Base Operator should be an advisor and not a voting member of the Advisory Committee.

**Finding 6** - The Solano County Aviation Advisory Committee meets quarterly.

**Recommendation 6** - The Solano County Aviation Advisory Committee should have more frequent regular meetings.

### **Comments**

The Nut Tree Airport has the potential to be a noteworthy asset to Solano County. Both business and recreational activity should be encouraged and supported by the community, as well as the Board of Supervisors. At the same time each group of users must understand that survival involves compromise.

### **Affected Agencies**

- Solano County Board of Supervisors
- Solano County General Services
- Nut Tree Airport Advisory Committee

### **Courtesy Copies**

- Solano Community College
- Airport Land Use Commission
- The Friends of the Nut Tree Airport