

Are you a pilot in the making?

Flying Club aims to make learning, flying affordable

By EDWARD STRATTON
The Daily Astorian

WARRENTON — The Port of Astoria has several efforts afoot, from runway rehabilitation to finding a private operator, to increase activity at the Astoria Regional Airport.

On a community level, a core group of private pilots at the airport hope to do the same through the Astoria Flying Club, still in the infant stages and reaching a drop-dead point.

The flying club holds its second meeting at 6:30 p.m.

today in the main terminal office at the airport, 1110 S.E. Flightline Drive in Warrenton.

It has, so far, gathered about 11 members. Organizers Allen Sprague and David West, both pilots at the airport, are trying to gauge people's willingness to step up, become officers and help run the flying club, which is trying to gain 501(c)(7) tax status as a social and/or recreational club.

"The club has to figure out how we'll do this," Sprague said, adding that it can't just be he and West starting the club. It doesn't cost any-

thing to become an officer in the organizational stages, he added.

It's looking for 20 to 30 members ultimately, Sprague said, each buying into their membership to cover the insurance on several planes it has gathered to rent out and help teach people how to fly.

"Ultimately, we're trying to make flying affordable again," Sprague said.

The club already has a Cessna 172 Skyhawk, a Cessna 177 Cardinal and a Piper PA-38-112 Tomahawk available for rental and flight instruction. Sprague said there's

a waiting list of plane owners wanting to rent out their aircraft to the club, just to keep them in working order. The planes come ready to fly, checked out by West, an aircraft mechanic based at the airport.

Sprague added that the club will do flight instruction for \$35 an hour, plus the cost of renting the aircraft, which the club is still figuring out.

Passion to fly

"If you don't have the passion to fly, there's no sense in wasting your time," said Sprague, who has had the passion since he was a child making balsa-wood gliders.

Sprague flies a 1965 Beechcraft Bonanza, which he refers to as the Cadillac of airplanes. He's flown since age 16, helped hunt Russian submarines from Lockheed



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Allen Sprague flies his 1965 Beechcraft Bonanza above Warrenton. Sprague and David West, both pilots at the Astoria Regional Airport are trying to gauge people's interest in becoming officers of the recently formed Astoria Flying Club to help get the club off the ground.

P-3 Orions in the military and has been providing scenic rides out of Seaside since 2006.

"I just love it," Sprague said, gliding at more than 150 mph Wednesday through the clouds above Warrenton. "It's peaceful to me. This is where

the world disappears, all the trouble."

Sprague said the best thing for anyone interested is to come out and fly — he sometimes runs short scenic flights. "I usually let them do the take-off, which usually puts a smile on their face."

Airport: Port shut the runway down because of safety issues

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"They're 60-years old and collapsing," Weston said of the drainage pipes and the large sinkholes and trenches that follow them, growing bigger with every major rain event.

The Port shut the runway down last summer because of the safety issues.

Precision Approach's project, according to a report filed by the company with the Port, includes:

- Repaving nearly 500,000 square feet of runway;
- Improving the grading along the sides and ends of Runway 13-31;
- Installing new drains and a stormwater sewer system;
- Improving the grading of the existing taxiways, down which pilots drive their planes before taking off on one of the two main runways;
- An upgrade of pavement marking.

The project will start in July or August, depending on when FAA money becomes available, Weston said.



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Mike Weston, the Port of Astoria's director of business development and operations, stands on the edge of a sinkhole that has formed in the grass near Runway 13-31 at the Astoria Regional Airport.

Important airport

"We're probably the largest airport in the region" Weston said, adding that it supports hundreds of jobs, between operations like the U.S. Coast Guard, Columbia River Bar Pilots, Lektro, Brim Aviation, UPS and others.

Runway 8-26, which was previously redone recently, is the longer of the two, at more

'The more activity we have. The more support we can get from the Federal Aviation Administration.'

— Mike Weston

Port of Astoria's director of business development and operations than 5,800 feet, able to take McDonnell Douglas DC-9s and Lockheed C-130 Hercu-



JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian

Allen Sprague lands his 1965 Beechcraft Bonanza on Runway 8-26. The runway has recently been redone and has an FAA-approved system to allow pilots to land using instruments during times of low visibility.

les. It has an FAA-approved system to allow pilots to land using instruments only, when visibility is down.

But when the winds come from the northeast in the summer, Weston said, Runway 13-31 becomes the preferred takeoff point.

The Port has already improved signage and lighting at the airport, with Helligso

Construction performing most of the work. But repaving the runway is part of a strategy to improve and expand the airport's operations.

Executive Director Jim Knight announced in November that the Port would pursue the idea of making Brim Aviation the private operator without seeking requests for proposals from other potential contractors. The Port is trying to structure a deal with Brim, which provides transportation for Columbia River Bar Pilots and trains visiting helicopter pilots at the airport, Weston said. Brim has said, through its management, it can increase the marketing of the airport and improve the service.

Weston added that the Port still wants direct access to the airport from U.S. Highway 101, via Harbor Drive on the northwestern edge of the property.

"The more activity we have," he said, "The more support we can get from the Federal Aviation Administration."

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Both positions require QMHA status, computer and writing skills (Spanish speaking a plus). Requires valid ODL, pass criminal history check. Exceptional benefits include Medical/Dental/Retirement. Salary DOE and based on current union contract for QMHA of \$29,001.00 to \$39,541.00.
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