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greet arriving pilots and also to provide real-time weather information for aviators as they are landing and taking off. Members of the Airport Volunteer Group (AVG) perform a function that was once filled by paid professionals but is now primarily the responsibility of a small group of dedicated volunteers.

The reason for the creation of the AVG several years ago was simple, money — or, more precisely, lack of money.

Mike Miller is the head of Florence Public Works and has direct oversight responsibility for the airport.

“The AVG was created during the tail end of the economic collapse and when the airport was completely out of reserves. The airport is operated just like one of our utilities, meaning that it needs to have an income stream to offset its expenditures,” Miller said.

“The city had already ceased transfers to Public Works and city administration to pay for our time and resources in managing the airport, meaning that we would continue to provide support but not be reimbursed by the airport.”

That was when Miller had a meeting with a small group of pilots and aviation enthusiasts, where an interesting idea to address the situation came up.

“A group of pilots came up with the idea to form the AVG, which would staff the airport office on a volunteer basis,” Miller said. “Our airport volunteers are the friendly face of the airport office. They welcome and greet pilots and their passengers from out of town; answer the airport office phone; and provide information and directions to local attractions.”

“The volunteers are also the ‘eyes and ears’ in regard to monitoring airport operations and alerting city staff of potential safety, security or maintenance issues.”

Some of the senior members of AVG gathered to shared thoughts on the Wings and Wheels event held at the airport on July 7. The unique aircraft and vintage vehicle show has continued to grow in each of its eight years, and the men and women of the AVG are major contributors to the success the event has enjoyed.

Miller believes Wings and Wheels is an important opportunity to highlight the airport and the many advantages it brings to residents of the area.

“The city has been actively involved in Wings and Wheels since the beginning. What better way to showcase the airport and bring in visitors to the airport?” Miller asked. “Our airport is small, and some community members do not realize that we even have an airport. The airport provides daily air overnight deliveries, air-

balance service, emergency services, flight instruction, a place for radio-controlled aircraft to safely operate (at the north end of the airport) and a great place for aircraft hobbyists to hone their skills.”

Sam Spayd, Steve Sauber, Carl Middleton and Terry Tomeny are central members of the AVG. All are more than willing to share their enthusiasm for the time they spend volunteering.

“The group was originally put together because we lost our airport manager,” Saubert said. “Our whole concept was to use volunteers to operate this facility, like the folks that help to manage the parks. We put this group together to save the city money and to keep the airport open and operating with someone on site to greet pilots.”

Spayd and Saubert are long-time residents of Florence, and Tomeny purchased Florence’s famous Stearman Bi-Plane from Spayd a few years ago. In so doing, he joined the loose fraternity of ex-military pilots and combat veterans that make up a significant portion of the area’s population.

Many of these veterans also staff the airport.

Between just these four members of the AVG, they have more than a century of flying experience between them. The stories and recollections are easy to come by, as the coffee starts kicking in and the doughnuts get passed around.

While spending time at the airport with members of the AVG has the relaxed feel of hanging out with a group of friends, the contributions made by the group are important.

“There are people that use different calculations, but I personally think we save the city between \$100,000 and \$150,000 a year, by the time you add up all the different aspects of what we do out here,” Tomeny said. “An airport this size is a major cog in the economics of an area like this, and it’s also important in other ways. One of these reasons we have such good delivery of UPS and Fed-Ex in Florence is they fly packages in every day for delivery in the Florence area.”

Over the intervening years, the group has grown from a small handful of volunteers to a few dozen people who perform basic observation and maintenance functions, each and every day at the airfield.

“We normally have about 30 people, that varies a little, and we all give one day a month or two,” Tomeny said. “There is a sign-up sheet and a checklist of the things we do when we open, and then you answer the phone and greet anyone that flies in. Then, when you are done, you clean up, get the coffee ready and call the next person on the list to remind them they are coming in the day.”

Another important service the AVG provides is to welcome pilots that are traveling from one place to another and have stopped in Florence for a visit or to rest.

A long-standing custom among aviators is to welcome incoming pilots to their airport and help make their stay as comfortable as possible. One of the ways this is accomplished is to provide a loaner car for pilot use. Generally, this vehicle is not in the best condition and is offered free of charge to visiting pilots.

“We had a 30-year-old Lincoln out here, which was a grand old car and people loved it. At many airports they loan cars to pilots. If you go from little airport to little airport, what are referred to as uncontrolled fields, it is not unusual for them to have a loaner car, and they are usually hilarious,” Middleton said. “They are old beater cars and they don’t charge anything for them. They give you the key and they ask that you put in as much gas as you use.”

Over the past couple of years Florence has seen a rebound in the local economy and the Florence Municipal Airport has been able to secure a number of leases for property under its control.

New long-term leases for the property off Kingwood Street, where both the new Public Works Facility is located and the Oregon Coast Military Museum has been for three years, has allowed Miller to use the increased revenue stream to replace and upgrade what has traditionally been a vehicular afterthought with one that is cutting edge.

According to Miller, these properties, as well as lots in the Pacific View Business Park, belonged to the airport.

“As such, the sale proceeds go to the airport to fund capital projects as well as operations,” he said. “We really looked at what we had at the airport and made two key investments. One was the new airport monument sign

for the airport and the other was getting a low maintenance and sustainable courtesy car.”

City staff worked with Johnston Motors to secure a quality lease return vehicle.

“With the Public Works new operations center and the effort we put into being efficient, effective and sustainable, it made sense to bring in a plug-in electric gas hybrid vehicle,” Miller said. “The plug-in electric speaks volumes to the city’s commitment to sustainability.”

Miller also said the airport can provide another economic engine for the city, now that some basic concerns expressed by pilots have been answered.

“The city has a strong commitment to the airport. We have come a long way since the dark days of the economic collapse and we continue to provide enhanced services to the airport. As a number of the Airport Advisory Committee members, as well as our out of area and visiting pilots, have stated on many occasions, the airport has never looked so good. As the economy continues to improve, the airport is staged to be a potential economic engine for the community,” Miller said.

Members of the Airport Volunteer Group are currently recruiting new members to their team. They encourage anyone interested in aviation, or looking for pleasant way to spend some time and contribute in a positive way to the work at the airport, to stop in and say hello.

“We welcome anybody who wants to come by for coffee and doughnuts, that’s fine,” Tomeny said. “But if anybody wants to sign up for the volunteer group, you don’t have to be a pilot and you don’t have to know anything about airplanes. We can tell you what’s involved and get you signed up.”

For more information on the Airport Volunteers Group, call Saubert at 541-999-8095 or Middleton at 530-305-5373.

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A whole host of volunteers, about 40 in total, made two or three pies a piece to donate to the event. Sandi’s specialty is apple.

“For me, the pie crust is the thing,” she said. “It’s shortening, flour and water. Don’t touch it too much, because that makes it flakey.” She added, “Never buy crust. It’s terrible. I would never think about buying crust.”

She would also never think about buying anything but granny smith apples for the pie, but it is other ingredients that really give the pie its flavor: cinnamon, sugar, butter and fresh nutmeg on top.

“Put the pie crust top on, pop it in the oven for 45 or 50 minutes at four and a quarter, and Voila!” Sandi said. “It shows love when you give somebody a pie. We serve them to all our friends, and if we aren’t friends when they come in, we make sure they’re friends before they leave.”

Friendship is what volunteering is all about.

Sandi said she was lucky growing up. She didn’t have much as she tried to raise her children. It was the generosity of others that helped get her through tough times.

“I know what it felt like to be the recipient, and it’s much more gratifying to be the giver, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Much more than being the taker,” added her friend and fel-

low volunteer Margaret McDiarmid.

Margaret was running back and forth in the room, making sure all the pies were stocked.

“And it makes me feel younger,” Sandi added. “I’m 76, but I don’t feel 76.”

Margaret joked, “I’m not old enough to be 76.”

“Really?” Sandi asked.

Someone else yelled out, “Me neither.”

“Well, there you go. Two friends lost,” Sandi joked.

Friendship is only natural for a place like Florence, Sandi said.

“Most of us come to here from other towns or other states, and we combine here,” she said.

And the best way to give back to a community of friends is to give back. She volunteers at the hospital, the American Rhododendron Society and the P.E.O. Foundation.

“And in my free time, I nap,” she added. “And make pies, of course.”


Most of her days find her waking up at 6 a.m., showing up to her duties at 7, and working until noon.

“When I wake up, I think, ‘Oh no, another day,’” Sandi said. “But when I’m there, it’s all great. It just somehow works.”

For Sandi, and all of those who gave their time during the Power of Florence, volunteering is as American as apple pie.

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