

Center from A1

Self-promotion has been part of that uptick. To accelerate the airport's popularity, Nadine has been getting the word out about the new center to various aviation bodies, putting the modest airport on the map.

Shawn, a pilot himself, is an aero-volunteer for the Oregon Department of Aviation. "That basically means that there's nobody else around, so I'm here," he said.

As part of his routine duties, Shawn walks the runway, calls in general maintenance issues, checks to make sure everything is up to snuff and helps visiting pilots however he can.

Though Nadine accepted the Impact Award at the Cottage Grove Chamber of Commerce Banquet this year for getting the welcome center built, she takes her role with some humility.

"I'm just the wife of the pilot," she said with a laugh. "And I wanted a bathroom here."

More than a decade ago, the previous owner picked up the entire structure that had been there and moved it off-site, leaving nothing but a barren slab of broken cement and a portable toilet by the tarmac. For years, this was effectively Cottage Grove Airport's point of welcome. Unsurprisingly, aerial visitations were in a slump.

At a Chamber of Commerce meeting on attracting tourism in 2014, Nadine turned to her husband and said how nice it would be to just give the airport a bathroom. From this the welcome center was born.

"I wanted something that looked good," said Nadine.

As the nearly-four-year project took root and gathered momentum, the State of Oregon was very receptive to the building of the

center when approached by the Kelleys. Their plan had included making donations tax deductible and handing ownership over to the state once construction was completed.

"Because even if we owned it, we could just shut it down next year and say, 'Sorry. It's

demonstrated their seriousness in completing the project, they suddenly found themselves at the top of the state's priorities list. In 2016, they got their entire runway redone and they're also expecting the tarmac to get some work to even it out in the future.

"I'd say about 80 percent of the people who land here go into town."

— Shawn Kelley

too hard. We don't want to operate it. We don't want to pay for everything," Nadine said. "They were the best choice because they'll keep it open as long as ever is ever."

Getting the state on board was a boon for the airport in more than one way.

At the time, the runway at the north end was cracked, uneven and failing. On the state's list of 28 airports to maintain, Cottage Grove was at the bottom of the repair priorities list due to its small size and low traffic.

Instead, the state had planned to mark off and abandon 500 unusable feet of the 3,188-foot runway, limiting the kinds of aircraft that could land and further reducing its attractiveness for pilots.

"3,000 to 3,500 is normal length," said Shawn.

Such situations can be a death spiral for small airports.

"When we start cutting your runway, next thing you know fuel isn't here anymore and then once you don't have fuel here then traffic really shuts down the state goes, 'Ehhh, okay,'" said Shawn. "And it happens. Once you start cutting it, you start giving less and less maintenance and then you know it's over with."

In all, the project cost a little more than \$100,000 to see its August 2017 ribbon cutting. The Department of Aviation officially calls it a "pilot's lounge," but the Kelleys call it a welcome center.

"It's really a tourist information center for pilots," said Nadine. "They can find information, relax, get out of the weather."

Before the center came up, Nadine lamented the state of the airport when bad weather would force pilots to land. "There've been several pilots over the years who've been stuck [here]," she said. "And what do they do? Stand under the tree."

Now, with a place to sit down inside and do flight reviews or planning, flight schools from Corvallis and Lane Community College have started using the airport, the former benefiting from a flight distance of over 50 miles, which qualifies student pilots to log valuable "cross-country" time.

As an added bonus to the center, the City of Cottage Grove has provided a courtesy car at the center for visitors to borrow and take into town. Through donations, the Kelleys gave the city back \$140 toward car maintenance at the end of last year.

The airport's quaint charm makes it an attractive pit stop for pilots like Californian Elias Murraymetzger, who

took a few minutes to chat at the welcome center while waiting for the courtesy car.

"This is a lovely airport. Absolutely lovely," he said. "It's a shame more people don't know and understand that there are so many airports like this all over the United States — in Oregon and in California."

Murraymetzger is a flight instructor out of San Carlos, Calif.

"I run an instructional service and my students like to go cross-country, so we pick interesting destinations and head out," he said. "That's the thrill for me as an instructor, to go to someplace new because it always presents new and interesting challenges for both the instructor and the student."

The Cottage Grove State Airport is a non-towered airport, also known as an "uncontrolled airport," which means it lacks air traffic control from a tower.

"It's a different challenge than landing at a larger airport that has a control tower or radar services," Murraymetzger said. "Here it's self-announced and you negotiate with other pilots in the area."

Such landings are useful skills for student pilots to learn.

Students may also benefit from the airport's newly-improved runway.

"When we landed, everybody commented how smooth the runway was," said Murraymetzger. "That's a special treat because a lot of the runways could use some improvement. ... We love it when we see airports that are well-maintained, that have a fresh runway and have ample parking."

On top of the amenities, Murraymetzger appreciated the small-town intimacy that comes with landing at places like Cottage Grove. "I'd make a strong argument for the small airports any day of the week," he said.

As the flight instructor took the courtesy car into town, two new arrivals hopped on the airport's bicy-

cles to seek out nearby points of interest recommended by Shawn.

"I'd say about 80 percent of the people who land here go into town," Shawn said.

The airport's location also puts it within walking distance of several restaurants, which many visitors are said to take advantage of.

While it's difficult to quantify the economic impact of the welcome center on the town, fuel sales at the airport provide a bit of insight into the degree of traffic increase. Since the center's construction, fuel sales have increased 21 percent and, by the end of the current fiscal year, the airport is reportedly on track to increase sales another four or five percent.

The Kelleys are hopeful those numbers will continue rising.

"An airport is an aviation gateway to a city and it can bring in unique economic advantages as well — besides just getting a new bathroom instead of a Porta Potty," Nadine said. "Our goal is to bring business into Cottage Grove."

Nadine makes sure to provide updated information on Cottage Grove businesses for visitors who drop in, going as far as to pick up menus from new restaurants to add to the center's catalogue.

"The hotels, and shops and Cottage Theatre — anything I can think of I try to bring in to the book so people can see what they can do," said Nadine. "Now I want to pay the people back. ... and give back to the community in that way."

For this particular kind of weather-dependent tourism, the coming summer is an opportunity to see how well the word has spread among the pilot community.

"The old Porta Potty was just a bad message: 'Do your businesses, now go away. Leave us alone,'" Nadine said. "Now we say, 'We want you here. Look what we've got to offer you.' Because Cottage Grove has a lot to offer."

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