



THE SKY'S THE LIMIT



FAMILY DAY @ the jetport, the annual aviation festival at Raleigh Exec, is often the first look locals get at Lee County's growing airport. Its expansive grounds are well off the beaten path, not the kind of place you pass every day going for a loaf of bread. Everyone seems impressed, especially when they see some of the larger jets take flight. It's not uncommon for a Gulfstream V to come through with its 93-foot wingspan and cabin large enough for almost 20 passengers, and a good number of large corporate jets currently fill hangars surrounding the field.

Folks climbing into helicopters and walking through planes during the festival last October had reactions that fell into predictable categories — often either “I didn't know the airport was this big” responses or “I never even knew this was here.”

If they could only get a look behind the scenes and see everything the airport means for the community, they might be downright shocked. With private aviation taking off and the Research Triangle region soaring with growth, everyone associated with local aviation believes that, for Raleigh Exec, the sky's the limit.

"AN AMAZING THING"

When the airport was renamed two years ago, from its former designation as the Sanford-Lee County Regional Airport, it surely raised some eyebrows. Why would an airport closer to Sanford be named for a city farther away? Those in the know saw it as a signal that the airport was already thriving and beginning to become a serious player in the Research Triangle region.

Economic developer Bob Heuts says the change was a strategic decision to strengthen an airport that has catered

based in Sanford, like Frontier Spinning Mills, use private jets as a way to move people quickly and efficiently from one manufacturing location to another. But it's not just the large companies that reap benefits.

Carter Keller, a Sanford native who serves as chairman of the North Carolina Aeronautics Council, the state's aviation advisory board, also is one partner in a family-owned construction and development company. He often flies a single-engine Piper Saratoga from Raleigh Exec to visit construction projects around the state. "Companies like small architectural and engineering firms that have small staffs can get to the site quickly and then get back to the office," Keller says. "I can fly to Oxford and be there in 20 minutes or I can drive and *hopefully* be there in an hour and a half. It's a way of creating time, and by flying a single-engine plane, it's not cost prohibitive."

Business is king at Raleigh Exec, but there's a lot more



Airport manager Dan Swanson maneuvers a Falcon corporate jet on the field at Raleigh Exec, right photo, while Kellett Wade handles refueling. The growing regional airport already is the third-largest general aviation facility in the state.

to corporate flights ever since moving from a tiny, cramped location downtown to its spacious home just 15 miles from I-540, Raleigh's outer loop now being constructed. "We were already serving as a regional airport with a lot of traffic coming in and out of Raleigh, but some pilots didn't automatically associate us with Raleigh or the Research Triangle Region," says Heuts. "The name change made this clear to everyone, tied us to all of the energy just up the road in Wake County and has certainly raised our visibility."

Raleigh Exec is emerging as a major player. With nearly 130 aircraft based on the field and an average of more than 140 takeoffs and landings every day, it's already the third largest among more than 60 publicly owned, general-aviation airports across North Carolina, a category that includes all but the state's nine passenger airports.

Having one of the newer and busier airports nearby has its advantages. Even casual observers know that companies

happening. Field trips. Sightseeing flights. Special events. And recreational flying, too. The Wings of Carolina Flying Club, which relocated from Chapel Hill several years ago, has more than 300 members using the airport regularly and, according to president David Greenfield, has been in "a growth mode" for the last year and a half.

"For something most people don't visit very often, you wouldn't believe how positive the airport has been for the community," says Heuts. "Most cities would love to have an asset like Raleigh Exec and all of the business it brings. This is an amazing thing for Sanford."

AN ECONOMIC ENGINE

For a facility so far off the public radar, it's hard to grasp how much Raleigh Exec affects local business. The best guess comes from an economic study published five years ago at North Carolina State University, which estimated the airport's total impact at more than \$280



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million per year.

The largest part of that figure, almost \$206 million, was credited to economic activity generated directly by the airport and companies operating there (a number currently at seven). The rest came from activity taking place away from the airport grounds, but still attributed to the facility, and then the economic "multiplier effect," a common method used to estimate what happens when money generated is respent locally. The same study also credited Raleigh Exec with creating 1,735 jobs and attracting 7,310 visitors.

With such a strong economic force, local officials became creative in how the airport was marketed, having daily operations handled by airport manager Dan Swanson and much of the direction provided by Heuts' economic development office. It's an approach that impresses state Division of Aviation Director Richard Walls.

"This is an exciting new trend and very strategic," says Walls, who is responsible for aviation at the North Carolina Department of Transportation. "It shows that local leaders realize the airport can be

a strong contributor to the local economy When you combine the strong, local leadership and the outstanding facility with a high-growth area like the Triangle, I think you will see continued growth in the airport and better things to come."

Keller agrees. He visits scores of airports in his role with the state aviation board and often is impressed by what he sees. At the same time, those visits have made him appreciate even more what is available here. "As far as an economic development tool, that is our front door when it comes to large companies," says Keller. "When they come to Lee County to look at locating here, they're going to come to the airport. That's the first impression that our community is going to make, and here, you've got one of the nicest airports in the state."

FULL THROTTLE AHEAD

Several recent developments point to smooth skies ahead. At the same time the airport is becoming more accessible to Raleigh, with that new section of Interstate nearby, the capital city is burgeoning. According to U.S. Census tallies released

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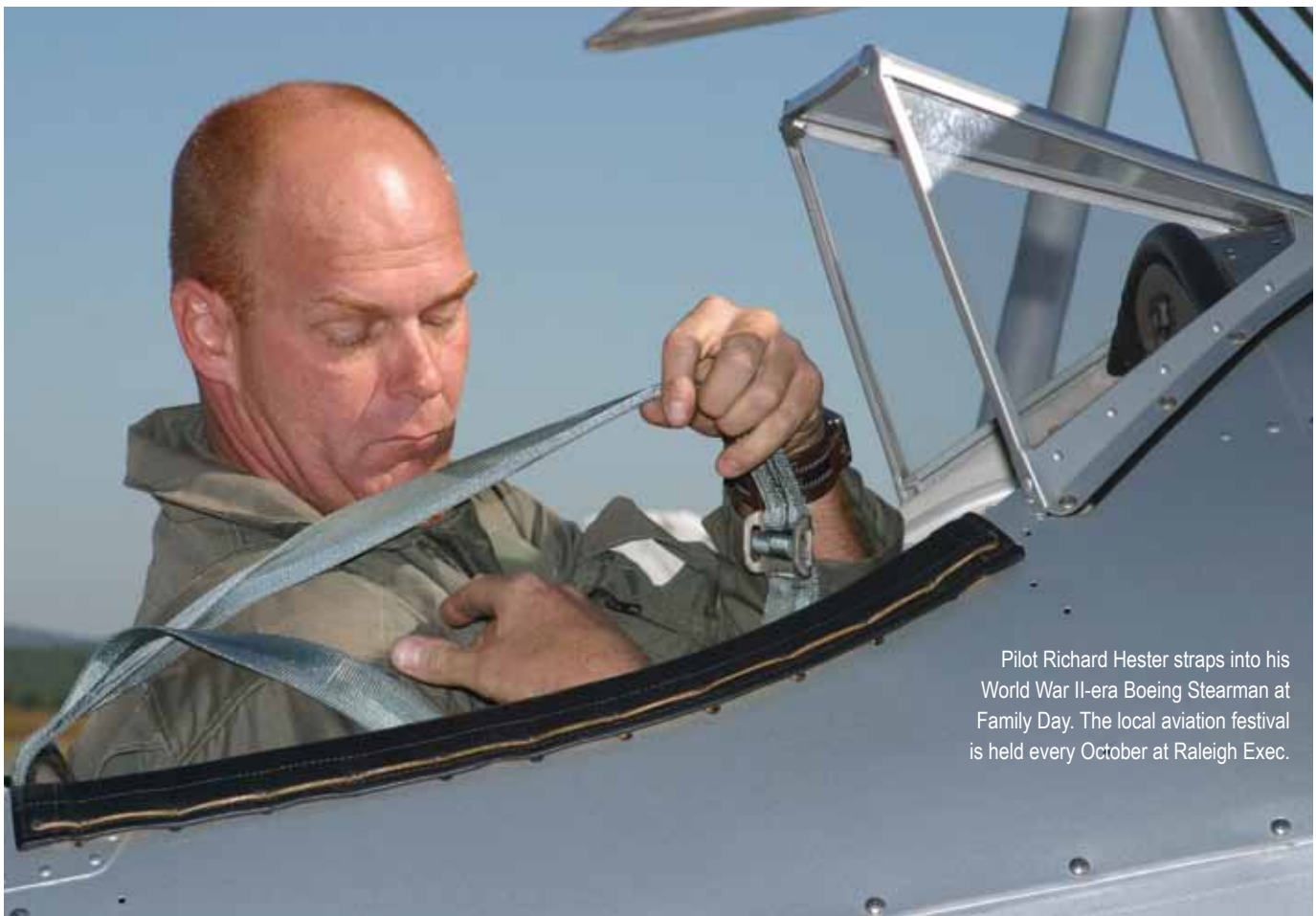
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Pilot Richard Hester straps into his World War II-era Boeing Stearman at Family Day. The local aviation festival is held every October at Raleigh Exec.

in March, Raleigh's population ascended from 276,093 to 403,892 in the last decade, a 46.4 percent jump. So did the number of people living in Cary (43 percent), Durham (22 percent) and Chapel Hill (17.5 percent), making the Research Triangle Region one of the nation's hot spots.

With more people, there's more commerce. And with more commerce, major airports like Raleigh-Durham International will become even busier, making Raleigh Exec all the more attractive for business. For large sections of the metropolitan area, Swanson says, Raleigh Exec

already provides a quicker alternative from the office to the air. While the mileage may be higher, the wide-open highways make travel faster — as do parking at the door, easy access to hangars and practically no wait for takeoff.

Then, there's the overall trend toward private aviation. It's true that if you look back over the last few years, numbers have slumped due to the economy. With business off, both private and passenger flights have dipped; but as things rebound, more people will be traveling — on the ground and in the air. Walls says most aviation experts are predicting a prolonged period of growth beginning some time within the next two years. Throw in a growing emphasis on recruiting aviation and aerospace companies to North Carolina, and the long-term is looking up.

When the next decade rolls around, perhaps another half dozen businesses will be operating in new buildings around the field, more corporate jets will fill hangars or an overnight delivery company will be flying packages in and out of the region. And when visitors return for Family Day, there will be even more to amaze new and returning guests alike.

Whatever the case, aviation leaders aren't taking Raleigh Exec for granted. "The airport is an asset and provides benefits to the *entire* community, not just those who use the airport," says Walls. "The economic benefits of the airport help all the local citizens and make the area significantly more viable." ■

Premier corporate gateway to Raleigh and the Research Triangle Region



Triangle SKIES
RALEIGH EXEC

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RALEIGH EXEC Quick Fact:
Get cabin fever? RALEIGH EXEC offers educational tours throughout the year for school, scouting and other community groups. Visits can include facility tours, a close-up look at aircraft and even sightseeing flights.

FAMILY DAY @ the jetport draws 5,500 guests

Hundreds of children took to the sky for their very first time last fall during "FAMILY DAY @ the jetport" presented by Capital Bank, an annual aviation festival at RALEIGH EXEC.

More than 5,500 guests filled the jetport grounds in October to tour planes, military and vintage aircraft, watch flyovers and generally celebrate aviation.

First Flights. The biggest attraction, by far, was First Flights offered to children, most of them courtesy of the EAA Young Eagles, a national pilot outreach giving young people a taste of aviation.

Many of the 520 passengers approached their flight with a sense of excitement, some with apprehensions, but

all of them landed with a look of joy and a really great story to tell in school.

More Fun. While aviation was the focus, "FAMILY DAY @ the jetport" was more than helicopters, planes and flyovers. Visitors who prefer their adventures on the ground met Bart Myers, a popular competitor on ABC's *Jeopardy!* whose Southern Modified Tour who also gained fame on History television's "Madhouse" series.

Then, there was plenty of great food from local vendors, and prize drawings conducted by WINGWIFAR Radio, which introduced us from the event.

Mark Your Calendars. "FAMILY DAY @ the jetport" returns Saturday, Oct. 8, 2011, for its third annual festival.

EAA Young Eagles flights and plenty of aircraft vehicles will be featured once again, and special guests will be announced in coming months at Facebook.com/raleighexec.

EVENTS @ the jetport

<p>February 20 Wings of Carolina Flying Club "South Eastern" Contest. The flying club based at RALEIGH EXEC hosts the U.S. Air Force Reserve's 35th and U.S. Air Force's 43rd Airlift Wings based at Charlotte Air Force Base. Contest will be held at the jetport.</p>	<p>March 11 Wings of Carolina Flying Club "Second Saturday" Contest. A monthly contest providing a chance to meet with club members, local pilots and others interested in aviation. \$5 per plate, noon to 2 p.m. Contact: wofc@wingsofcarolina.org</p>	<p>April 11 Wings of Carolina Flying Club "Second Saturday" Contest. A monthly contest providing a chance to meet with club members, local pilots and others interested in aviation. \$5 per plate, noon to 2 p.m. Contact: wofc@wingsofcarolina.org</p>	<p>May 11 North Carolina Aeronautics Council Meeting. The club's aviation advisory board returns to RALEIGH EXEC for its monthly meeting. Open to all will be held this year in Raleigh, Greensboro and Statesville. 10:30 a.m. to 3 p.m. Visit: general@ncacouncil.com</p>
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Earlier this year, Raleigh Exec began publishing "Triangle Skies," focusing on news and events at the airport. While its emphasis has been on luring Triangle-based corporate aviation, the quarterly newsletter has a distinctively local feel.