

New Medicine

Healthy Airport Is Panel's Goal

By Cyril Zaneski
Staff Reporter

If public attention will help keep underused Smith Reynolds Airport healthy, as some airport officials believe, Kenneth D. Cox may be able to supply the medicine.

Cox, the president of the airport's Air Service Improvements Task Force, finally got attention for his new group last month by stirring up a little trouble.



COX

He directed a few timely blasts at the Greater Winston-Salem Chamber of Commerce. He accused the chamber of undermining airport efforts to get a jet carrier and called for the resignation of its executive vice president.

Though he apologized later for asking for the resignation, his diatribe ended a clammy silence between the airport and the chamber and shaped a rough-and-tumble image for the task force that Cox believes will help it get down to its real business, promoting the airport in the community at large.

Last week, Cox met with chamber officials to discuss face-to-face what Smith Reynolds officials find so ugly: the chamber's interest in having Forsyth County represented on the Regional Airport Authority. The chamber is to form a committee this year to study the matter, and Cox hopes that they keep Smith Reynolds' interests in mind — or else.

"If they raise their hands again and say we want representation in Greensboro, I'm going to throw rocks at them," he said. "The Chamber of Commerce is supposed to represent the small-business man of Forsyth County, and if they don't, shame on them."

Cox is a straight-talking heating and air-conditioning contractor who is new to the limelight. He's not necessarily comfortable there, but the airport needed a lift; it has lain low since Piedmont Airlines removed commercial service in 1983.

Cox has chosen to become the most visible member of a small group that has no real power and only hopes that it can win public support for the airport. About 10 people, most of whom have specific interest in flying, have attended recent meetings.

The ultimate goal is to lure and accommodate commercial air service so that a refurbished passenger terminal at Smith Reynolds is more than a tomb. Currently, Sunbird Airlines, a commuter airline, offers the only passenger service, five flights a day — or a total of about 650 or 700 passengers a month — to Charlotte.

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Cox, a licensed pilot for 10 years, approaches his volunteer role with the glee that he expresses for flying. He talks about flight with childlike wonderment.

"Flying just goes against the rules in every way, shape and form. Man is just not supposed to fly... And I think people are fascinated just looking at it."

Cox just sees other people sharing that enthusiasm — naturally.

He promotes the airport like a carnival hawker. Last month, when the county airport commission discussed possible improvements to the airport restaurant, Cox chimed in. He proposed that Sunday airplane rides be offered for the general public as entertainment for people at the restaurant.

The idea is activity. The more planes that take off and land at the airport, the more gasoline is sold, the more people know about it and the more it becomes their own.

So Cox suggests a whole lot of things, some of which are being investigated: starting an annual air show; beginning a charter service to Winston-Salem for shopping excursions from Northwest North Carolina and Virginia; convincing the N.C. National Guard, which is now in Charlotte, to settle here; adding more general-aviation flights; recruiting a private aircraft dealership and persuading Sunbird, which has shown little interest in aggressive promotions here, to offer direct flights from Winston-Salem to nearby resorts.

Ultimately, Cox hopes that a busy Smith Reynolds will stay alive as the airport in Fort Worth, Texas, stayed alive.

Last month, commercial air service returned to Fort Worth for the first time in 30 years. The new Fort Worth Airlines began service to Texas cities from the airport, which had lost commercial air service but had stayed healthy by hearty helpings of pilot lessons and general aviation.

The Smith Reynolds Airport promotion — though an apparent obsession with Cox — is really a hobby to the chief executive of Carolina Heating and Air Conditioning.

Somehow, Cox manages to find a way to stay close to airplanes.

When he was the manager at the Gilley and Tolley Coal Co. in Winston-Salem, (now the PNG Coal and Oil Co.) his repairmen were pilots — first, because the company had service contracts all over the Southeast, and second, because Cox believes that knowing how to fly makes one a better mechanic.

Flying teaches a person to be more methodical, he said, and more likely to make do in trying situations.

"If you're up on a 20-foot ladder and you drop your pipe wrench, you have to improvise, just the way you would have to improvise if something goes wrong with your plane at 20,000 feet," he said.

Cox, 38, was born in Fort Myers, Fla., and moved to Winston-Salem as a child. He attended Hargrave Military Academy in Chapman, Va. and then Wingate College; he intended to become a military chaplain but found that business appealed to him a bit more.

At Wingate, he met his first wife, Linda Gilley, whose father, James Gilley, was an owner of the coal company that Cox managed for 15 years. When it was sold, he took some trucks and equipment and started Carolina Heating and Air Conditioning.

Cox spends a good part of his days doing paperwork behind a desk cluttered with paper, answering a phone that rings about every 10 minutes with customers asking for service or advice for their heating systems.

He and his second wife, Judy Hundley Cox, own and manage the heating and air-conditioning company. The company, which has six employees, does most of its work for Forsyth Partners and some major contractors. The company has been busy at Northpoint offices and at Airpark East.

Working at Airpark East, an industrial park being built near Regional Airport, stirred some resentment in Cox of the Winston-Salem chamber's efforts to place a representative on the board of the Guilford County airport.

It was in December, not long after Cox took charge of the task force, that Charles Webb, the chamber's execu-

tive vice president, told a reporter that it was more convenient to drive to Greensboro for a flight than to fly to Charlotte from Winston-Salem for a connection. A week later, People Express, which had been negotiating with Smith Reynolds, announced that it would go to Regional Airport, and Cox and William Rankin II, the manager of Smith Reynolds, blamed Webb and the chamber.

There had been friction between the airport and the chamber since September, when the chamber scheduled Stanley Frank, the chairman of the Regional Airport Authority, to speak at its retreat and seemed to Smith Reynolds officials to have invited a Winston-Salem representative as an afterthought. Frank's topic: Forsyth County representation on the authority.

Cox believes basically that representation on the Regional Airport Authority would deprive Forsyth County residents of having a choice between two airports and could leave the Triad without a second airfield that he believes will be necessary if the area grows as some expect it will.

This is why: A Forsyth representative would be outvoted by those from cities in Guilford County. Members of the Smith Reynolds commission say that the authority could ask the U.S. Department of Transportation to strip Winston-Salem of its designation as an independent airport and thus lose opportunities for federal money and any chance of getting another commercial jet carrier.

Chamber officials counter that the time has come for Winston-Salem and Forsyth officials to have a say in what happens at the airport their residents use. As for the federal aid, officials have said that the money could be replaced from other sources. (Over the past two years, Rankin said, Smith Reynolds has received almost \$600,000 in federal money to pay for resurfacing taxiways and for improvements to the passenger terminal.)

"It sure is a lot easier to like somebody than to hate him," Cox said. "At least, if (the chamber and the airport) disagree, we could keep quiet if we have nothing good to say about each other."