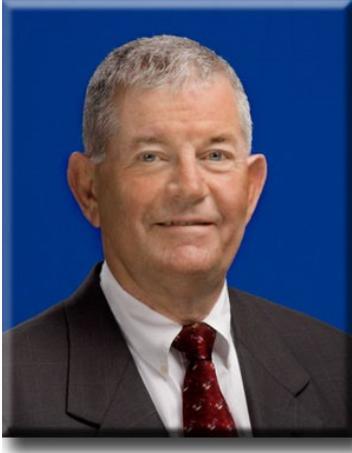


TEXAS AIRPORTS AT A CROSSROADS

When I left my job as Director of Aviation for the Tennessee Department of Transportation on May 15th, 1992, to join the newly created Texas Department of Transportation as their first Aviation Division Director, there is no way that I could have ever imagined that I would still be here 27 years later. But without question, coming to Texas was the best decision I made during my professional career.



One of the first things I did, shortly after I arrived, was to take a TxDOT vehicle and drive all over the state to take a look at the Texas General Aviation Airport System. Compared to the Tennessee Airport System, I was shocked to see what poor condition most of the airports were in, particularly in the rural parts of the state.

The Texas Department of Transportation had just been created by the Texas Legislature, merging the aviation and highway programs. The aviation program was supported by 37 employees while the highway program staff numbered well over 12,000. Somewhat intimidating, to say the least.

As I spent time with the TxDOT Aviation Division staff, I also learned that the Texas state airport improvement grant budget for the entire year was \$1.4M. Funding intended to support some 278 general aviation airports statewide.

So here I was in a new department that did not understand us, a statewide airport system in very poor condition, with no money to speak of.

However, after seeing the professionalism, dedication, and commitment of the Aviation Division staff, I said to myself, "This is going to be a lot of fun". And it has been. Somehow, we figured out how to get the funding we needed and spent the next 27 years transforming the Texas General Aviation Airport System from one of the worst in the nation to one of the best. How could you not have fun doing that.

No question, the job was a challenge, and still is today. Few people understand the true value of small community airports, particularly to the rural areas of the state. But after 44 years in the business, first in Tennessee and then Texas, I have seen time after time, new companies moving into cities and counties, creating jobs, with the local airport being a major contributor.

As I leave TxDOT, I assure you that the Aviation Division staff is highly capable to continue their work in keeping the Texas General Aviation Airport System the best in the nation.

But TxDOT Aviation and its programs have now reached a crossroads. The future does not look very bright. Texas is one of the very few states that does not have a dedicated source of state funds for airport development.

Currently, funding for state airport grants come from the state highway fund. That level of funding, approximately \$ 16M per year, has not changed in over 20 years. During that time, the increase in airport construction costs has more than doubled, resulting in the effectiveness of the state grant program being less than half of what it used to be. The impact of this has been felt for years.

With the tremendous need for more roads to accommodate the huge increase in Texas' population, a lack of increase in highway funding for our state's airports is certainly understandable. The Texas Legislature must find some other way besides highway funding to help support our state's airports.

We have now reached a critical point. The TxDOT Aviation Division has a fine, highly competent and committed staff. But without an adequate level of state funding to help cities and counties improve and maintain their local airports, the state airport system will soon no longer be one of the best in the nation.

Since TxDOT was created in 1991, \$ 1.45B in federal and state grants has transformed the Texas General Aviation Airport System from one of the worst in the nation to one of the best. That investment must be protected. These airports provide critical air transportation needs and support economic growth and development for every region of the state.

Local governments in Texas appreciate and depend upon the benefits that their local airport provides. But local governments alone cannot continue to improve and maintain their airports without help from the state. Millions of dollars in tax revenue each year is generated for the state's general fund from the General Aviation industry. This money should be used to improve and maintain our local airports. More help from state government is absolutely necessary.

Please reach out to your local and state representatives and help them understand the benefits of a good statewide airport system and the funding crisis that our airports are facing. Texas is widely recognized as the best state in the nation for many reasons. We need to continue to be recognized as having the best airport system as well.

David S. Fulton
Director of TxDOT Aviation, Retired