

The Flight Pattern is Clear

Continued, record growth at Bozeman's Gallatin Field means that change is in the air

By Nicole Rosenleaf Ritter Photography by Thomas Lee

Bozeman's rapid growth has produced plenty of impressive statistics: Population is up more than 30 percent since 1990; the median housing price has shot past \$250,000; 630,000 square feet of commercial space were developed in 2006 alone. Now add 317 percent growth to that list. And 167 percent. And number two. Three hundred seventeen percent is how much passenger enplanements — that is, the number of people boarding aircraft — increased at Gallatin Field Airport between 1985 and 2005. One hundred sixty seven percent represents the increase in private and corporate aircraft based at Gallatin Field. And number two? That's the position of Gallatin Field among Montana airports. With 327,856 passengers boarded in 2006, Bozeman's airport ranks second only to Billings in traffic. Gallatin Field also set a new record in the first four months of 2007, emplaning nearly 107,000 people — more, even, than Billings' Logan International Airport, thanks to the ski season. Talk about impressive — and perhaps a little overwhelming. Airport director Ted Mathis has had a birds-eye view of the process. At Gallatin Field for 26 years, Mathis says that accommodating the area's rapid growth and demand for air service has been "the greatest challenge." "We've seen a regionalization of airports," he notes. "If you look in our parking lot, you see cars from Big Timber and White Sulphur, even Helena and Butte. As this entire area grows, the airport has to grow with it." Responding to and planning for that growth is a long-term, ongoing process. "We went off the end of our 20-year master plan about six years ago, so we're doing a new master plan update now," Mathis explains. "We've expanded the terminal four times — two larger expansions and two smaller — in the last 14 years, along with the parking lot and ramp space and so forth. And we're just now putting the finishing touches on a master plan that shows we need to do a lot more (expanding)."

A NEW MASTER

Projections in the updated master plan show a trade area — the regional population using the airport, defined most simply as Gallatin County and the five surrounding counties of Broadwater, Jefferson, Madison, Meagher and Park — increasing in population by some 45 percent in the next 25 years, rising from just over 119,000 to more than 170,000 in the year 2030. That's a lot more potential passengers.

"We're at the point now where this building is no longer easily expandable. Our next expansion is going to have to be a sizable one," Mathis indicates.

Projects scheduled for this summer's construction season include a terminal ramp expansion, rehabilitation of the taxiway lighting system and a new service road. Money for those projects comes from a \$3.4 million federal grant awarded to the airport by the (federal) Department of Transportation (DOT). The airport also recently commissioned a new radar system, making Gallatin Field the first U.S. airport to partner with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to complete the safety enhancement.

Overall, the airport has been fully self-sustainable for 15 years — meaning no local tax money is used to support Gallatin Field. Only those who use the airport pay for its operations in the form of various user fees. It has also been debt-free for the past couple of years, but Mathis anticipates the coming expansion will require a \$22 million bond issue.

Down the road, among the more visible changes planned for the airport include a major expansion of the existing terminal, a parking garage or other additional parking, and the Interstate 90 interchange. The interchange project has been slow going, but Mathis says, "I am more optimistic now than I was just two months ago," when talk turns to the direct link from I-90 to the airport.

"It's moving forward," he notes. "The three local partners (the county, the City of Belgrade, and Gallatin Field) are working on an inter-local agreement, and the county is the sponsoring agent working with the state DOT. We're still working on additional federal funding, and the local match is coming together."

Construction is not expected to start on that project until 2010 or 2011. When completed, Mathis contends that it will represent "a major improvement not just for the airport but for the surrounding area."

Standing up to access a wall map of the area, Mathis points to Jackrabbit Lane. "Right now on a Friday afternoon, there is traffic backed up into the driving lanes waiting to get off the interstate," he says. "Belgrade will benefit greatly from this bypass road, as will people who commute from (west and north) of there. It's really critical for the future of Belgrade, not just for the airport."

WHAT'S ON THE 'HORIZON'

Along with the physical expansion and improvement of facilities, Mathis says that the airport is always sending feelers for new airlines and additional routes from the five airline brands already serving Gallatin Field. Just in the past 18 months, for example, Bozeman's airport has seen a dramatic increase in the number of direct flights available, including two daily non-stop flights to Chicago and seasonal direct flights to Atlanta, Detroit and — starting June 9 — San Francisco.

Mathis contends that the level of service is almost unprecedented in a town the size of Bozeman.

"When I go to national meetings and tell people I'm from Bozeman, they always assume we might have a commuter airline at most," he says. "When I tell them that we have United, Delta, Northwest, Horizon, and Big Sky, they can't believe it."

As for brands that may come to Bozeman in the future, Mathis says that while he knows local travelers are clamoring for Southwest or JetBlue, those airlines "don't routinely look at markets this small." The Airport Authority has been talking with Frontier — a Denver-based, low-fare carrier that provides service to 50 destinations in 30 states and eight cities in Mexico, along with two destinations in Canada — about adding service to Bozeman. Talks are ongoing.

Community and business involvement may prove a factor in negotiations, as it has in developing other routes from Bozeman. Big Sky concerns especially have encouraged additional flight possibilities for potential guests from all over the world. "It's very common for ski resorts and other areas like that to actually subsidize or guarantee a number of seats on an airline," Mathis says.

A PRIVATE AFFAIR

The pull of the Big Sky area — and in particular luxury enclaves such as the Yellowstone Club — explains another strong growth trend for Gallatin Field: private and corporate jets. "Three hundred a month (landing in Bozeman) is not uncommon," Mathis notes.

Some 275 private and corporate jets call the Gallatin Field their home base, up that aforementioned 167 percent since 1992. The growth has meant further expansion for the airport's general aviation facilities, but also plenty of work for the airport's fixed base operators, private companies that serve such aircraft.

continued on next page
"Our two fixed based operators, Arlin's Aircraft Service and the Yellowstone Jetcenter, have really stepped up, and they are truly first-class operations to accommodate those types of customers," Mathis notes.

As for reasons behind the growth in private airline traffic, Mathis theorizes that "airline security requirements and reductions in amenities in first class and long lines have pushed people over the brink, and those who can afford a corporate aircraft have decided they don't want to put up with the airlines. Also, there are a lot of people who have had corporate aircraft for years but have just recently discovered Montana," he adds.

The new "discoverers" are not limited to the Bozeman area, however. "If you drive south of Dillon, it's not uncommon to see a Grumman Gulfstream (airplane) sitting at the airport at Dell. If you drive north — it looks pretty funny, actually — it's not uncommon to see a Falcon 50 sitting on the ground in White Sulphur Springs," Mathis — a White Sulphur native — says with a smile.

It's all part of what Mathis calls the only thing the airline business can count on — continual change.

"As airlines develop new philosophies, get new aircraft and look at new business models, we've certainly seen those changes," he says. "It's continually evolving, and that's the interesting thing."

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Winter travelers used Gallatin Field in record numbers this year, helping to make the airport the state's busiest in early 2007.



Private planes at Gallatin Field have increased dramatically in recent years.