

South Lake Tahoe airport passes FAA inspection; major changes in the works

By Joann Eisenbrandt

Even though the Lake Tahoe Airport has not had scheduled commercial air service for more than a decade, the city has retained the airport's FAA-issued Part 139 Air Operating Certificate. This is required for airports serving scheduled air carrier aircraft to remain ready for the return of commercial service.

To obtain Part 139 certification, commercial service airports agree to meet specific operational and safety standards for the upkeep of the physical plant, to maintain accurate recordkeeping by the airport proprietor and fixed base operator (FBO), and to provide for adequate firefighting and rescue equipment and proper safety training for all personnel.

FAA inspections to ensure compliance are conducted annually, problems noted and time frames for correction given. On Aug. 27, 2012, Elizabeth Louie, FAA airport certification safety inspector from the Los Angeles Airports District Office, conducted the Lake Tahoe Airport's yearly Part 139 Airport Operating Certificate inspection.



Lake Tahoe Airport officials want to make sure all the FAA certificates are in place so commercial air service could return. Photo/LTN file

Last week, a rumor began circulating that the airport had failed to correct problems, specifically related to fire suppression equipment, by the deadline, and that the Part 139 Air Operating Certificate had been pulled. *Lake Tahoe News* and the city received inquiries.

South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry responded, "Somebody is certainly calling people and saying things that are not true. They're trying to stir the pot. I don't know what the source is, but it's disheartening."

FAA inspector Elizabeth Louie later confirmed, "This was a normal inspection. There are some 'housekeeping' items that need to be addressed, but the [Lake Tahoe Airport] certificate was not pulled."

The annual inspection included a review of airport and FBO files and logs; checking the runway and taxiways for correct slope, pavement condition, markings, lighting, and signage; inspecting rescue and firefighting equipment and reviewing personnel training records. The fuel farm and mobile fueler's fire suppression equipment (maintained by Mountain West

Aviation, the airport's FBO) was also checked. A post-inspection briefing was conducted with airport management and a "letter of correction" sent noting any violations.

"This is normal," Airport Director Sherry Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Every airport goes through this exact same thing and gets a list of corrections."

Noted this year was the need to perform a live fire drill, to light all the windsocks on the runway at night and ensure all fire suppression equipment was BC, not ABC (ABC extinguishers are corrosive to planes), and was currently certified and properly tagged. Last year's inspection requested development of a wildlife hazard assessment and management plan. Miller noted the city's fire extinguishers are all now correct, the live fire drill has been done and the runway windsocks are all lighted. The wildlife management plan will be put in place in the next several years – a timeframe acceptable to the FAA.

The remaining unresolved issue is with Mountain West Aviation's fire suppression equipment. The FAA correction letter states, "Mountain West Aviation (FBO) has expired fire extinguishers in the fuel storage area ... The mobile fueller's fire extinguishers have no tags." Miller adds, "[Michael Golden] has been notified that he's in noncompliance. He has the right kind (of fire extinguishers) on the fuel trucks ... but the fire suppression system at the fuel farm has not been certified every year by a licensed certifier."

Golden, president of Mountain West, disagrees. He told *Lake Tahoe News* that all his fire suppression equipment, "is current. We received a letter two years ago from Sherry [Miller] to change the fire extinguishers from ABC to BC and we did. Last year we were notified that our fuel truck meters were not certified. They have been certified. We haven't received anything verbally or in writing (from this year's inspection) that we're out of compliance."

1992 Airport Master Plan Settlement Agreement expires

Having a current Part 139 certification is crucial to the city's future plans for the airport. Officials have been actively seeking proposals for scheduled commercial air service, using smaller, quieter, new-generation aircraft, with the initial focus on routes to Los Angeles and San Diego. The last 20 years saw a number of short-lived, largely unsuccessful spurts of commercial service from a variety of airlines. The city points to the 1992 Lake Tahoe Airport Master Plan Settlement Agreement as a main cause for these failures.

This agreement among the city, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, California Attorney General's Office, League to Save Lake Tahoe and FAA resolved a swarm of lawsuits over noise restrictions and other operational issues at the Lake Tahoe Airport. It included a master plan and environmental impact report, and created the regulatory framework governing airport operations for 20 years. On Oct. 8 it expired.

A key issue discussed in the past was brought to the forefront by the expiration of the Settlement Agreement. Must the city prepare a new Airport Master Plan before reinstating commercial air service?

"The only environmental document we have right now is the EIR completed in 1992. It's still a viable document." Miller notes. "If we wanted commercial service now, we must operate under those documents, even if the SA has expired, because that EIR says what can and can't be done."

In July, Julie Regan, TRPA's external affairs chief, expressed her agency's viewpoint, "If the current (master) plan expires before a new plan is in place, the status quo would continue, i.e., the city would continue to operate the airport as a general aviation facility until a new plan is developed and put in place."

General aviation airports do not have scheduled commercial air service.

Kerry, at the time, disagreed, "We don't have to wait for a master plan to be completed to bring in commercial service."

The city has not had additional discussions with TRPA about this question, but has decided to prepare a full master plan study. It recently secured needed FAA funding and put out a request for qualifications for consultants to complete the document.

Master plan costs will be between \$450,000 and \$500,000, with federal funding paying 90 percent and the city 10 percent, and will take about a year and a half to complete. Three responses to the RFQ have been received, a committee has been formed to review them and make a recommendation to the City Council, with potential selection at the Dec. 11 council meeting.

But what happens if the city receives a serious proposal for commercial air service before the master plan is completed? There isn't a simple answer.

"If somebody wants to propose service," Kerry states, "they would have to meet the thresholds that are required. What those thresholds are ... that's a long conversation. We'll do what's required to be done, but it would depend on what's proposed. It's too broad a question to answer without having a specific proposal."

When asked if such a proposal were imminent, Kerry replied, "We have had someone interested, but we're not sure if they're just kicking the tires or are going to give us a proposal."

Potential outsourcing of airport management operations

As important to the city as securing commercial service is the need to control costs. Serious reductions in overall city staffing, and a reconfiguration and consolidation of duties

have already taken place. Outsourcing of airport management may be the next step.

On Oct. 9, the city put out a request for proposals inviting, "submissions from qualified and interested airport managers or management companies who will manage and operate the city's FAA certificated airport ... serving both general aviation and commercial aviation operations."

The city's goals, as stated in the RFP, are to increase the number of airport users, eliminate the city's subsidy of airport operations, maximize the facility's revenue potential and take advantage of all available and creative marketing opportunities.

The deadline for RFPs is Oct.31. They will be evaluated by a selection committee, interviews conducted and an award of contract potentially approved by the City Council on Dec. 11.

The transfer of management would begin within 60 days with a 36-month contract, with an option by the city to renew the agreement for two additional 12-month periods for a total of 60 months. All airport functions and staffing would remain basically the same – but would be performed by management company employees, not city staff.

Kerry emphasized this RFP process may not actually result in any changes to current airport management.

"Don't presume any specific action will be taken regarding the RFP. Putting out an RFP does not guarantee a specific outcome. It provides an opportunity to assess management and operations solutions," Kerry said.

The city could choose to reject any and all proposals, even from fully-qualified bidders, or to modify, postpone or cancel the RFP. Kerry declined to make any additional comments about the RFP, the options for current city airport employees, or elaborate on specifics regarding the city's plans until the

bidding process has closed.

While not all city employees appear aware of the RFP, current Airport Manager Miller sees value in it. "This is a good process to go through and the city and the public will get some good information from it."

The privatization of airport management was suggested several years ago by former City Manager Tony O'Rourke in his report to the City Council at its March 15, 2011, meeting. It was proposed as part of the city's five-year financial plan for, "structurally reducing the city's personnel costs."

This change has become a more common choice for airports, the Minden-Tahoe Airport among them. It has contracted out all airport operations and staffing to ABS Aviation Management.

In 2009, Douglas County was notified by the FAA that its ordinance imposing weight restrictions on aircraft wasn't appropriate under federal regulations, and unless it was changed, federal funding to the airport would stop.

"This led," as Douglas County Manager Steve Mokrohisky explained, "to an extensive public engagement process to figure out exactly what type of airport we wanted, which was a self-sustaining, general aviation airport focused on soaring, sport flying and corporate aviation."

While the ordinance was being revised, the airport manager left and the county contracted with ABS Aviation Management for airport management services for an interim six-month period while recruiting nationwide for a new county airport manager. Bobbi Thompson was the contracted airport manager with county staff remaining in the other positions. After the recruitment period, Mokrohisky was unsatisfied with the applicant pool.

"We didn't want to settle. We were pleased with the very good service we'd received from Bobbi and decided to ask ABS to

make a proposal," Mokrohisky told *Lake Tahoe News*.

In February 2011, the Douglas County signed a two-year agreement through January 2013 with ABS for overall airport management, with a yearly savings in airport staffing costs of \$50,000. Airport staff are all now ABS employees.

"They are all residents of Douglas County. Their business cards say Minden-Tahoe Airport, not ABS. From the public standpoint, there is no difference, other than the quality of service they've received. We've done a 180 at our airport and are now back on the map internationally as one of the top two locations for soaring. "

County airport employees all had the opportunity to apply for positions with ABS, and all who did secured them. Mokrohisky adds that even though airport operations have been outsourced, county oversight remains.

"We still have a Board of Commissioners. I oversee the airport manager. She comes to all my directors' meetings, and as before, issues related to airport leases, changes in fees, standards, rules and regulations require approval by the Board of Commissioners," he said.

"The city (of South Lake Tahoe) did inquire of the county how this has worked," Mokrohisky added. "This is a great example of a time when privatization works well in the private sector. ... The Minden-Tahoe Airport is the only financially self-sufficient general aviation airport in the state of Nevada."