

Fifty Years of Flight



September 17th, 2016

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Celebration Program

Laurens Marching Band – Michael Banewicz, Director

Presentation of Flag – Oneonta Job Corps Academy Color Guard

Welcome – Chuck D'Imperio

Greetings – Airport Commissioner Len Carson

Distinguished Guests - Gary Herzig, Mayor of Oneonta, Presiding
Albert S. “Sam” Nader, Former Mayor of Oneonta
Charles E. Schumer, U.S. Senator from New York (Invited)
Chris Gibson, U.S. Congressman 19th District
James L. Seward, New York State Senator 51st District
Col. Carlton Cleveland, U.S. Army National Guard
John H. Higgins - Alderman

Announcement of School Contest Winners – Chuck D'Imperio

Closing – Musical Tribute – Laurens Marching Band

Schedule of Events*

NYSP DWI Demo -10:30 and 1:30

Doug and Company on Bandstand - 11:00 and 1:00

Elk Creek Sky Divers - 11:30 (Scheduled)

Recognition Ceremony - 12:00

Planes and more slideshow - Bob Parmenter - 1:00 in Conference Room

Pilots Roundtable - Les Grummons - 2:00 in Conference Room

All Day Activities

Tours

Historical Displays

Aircraft Fly-In's

Helicopter Rides

Airplane Rides - (Pending)

Air National Guard Display

Food and Drink venues

Other venues and displays

Lifenet 7-8

New York State Police

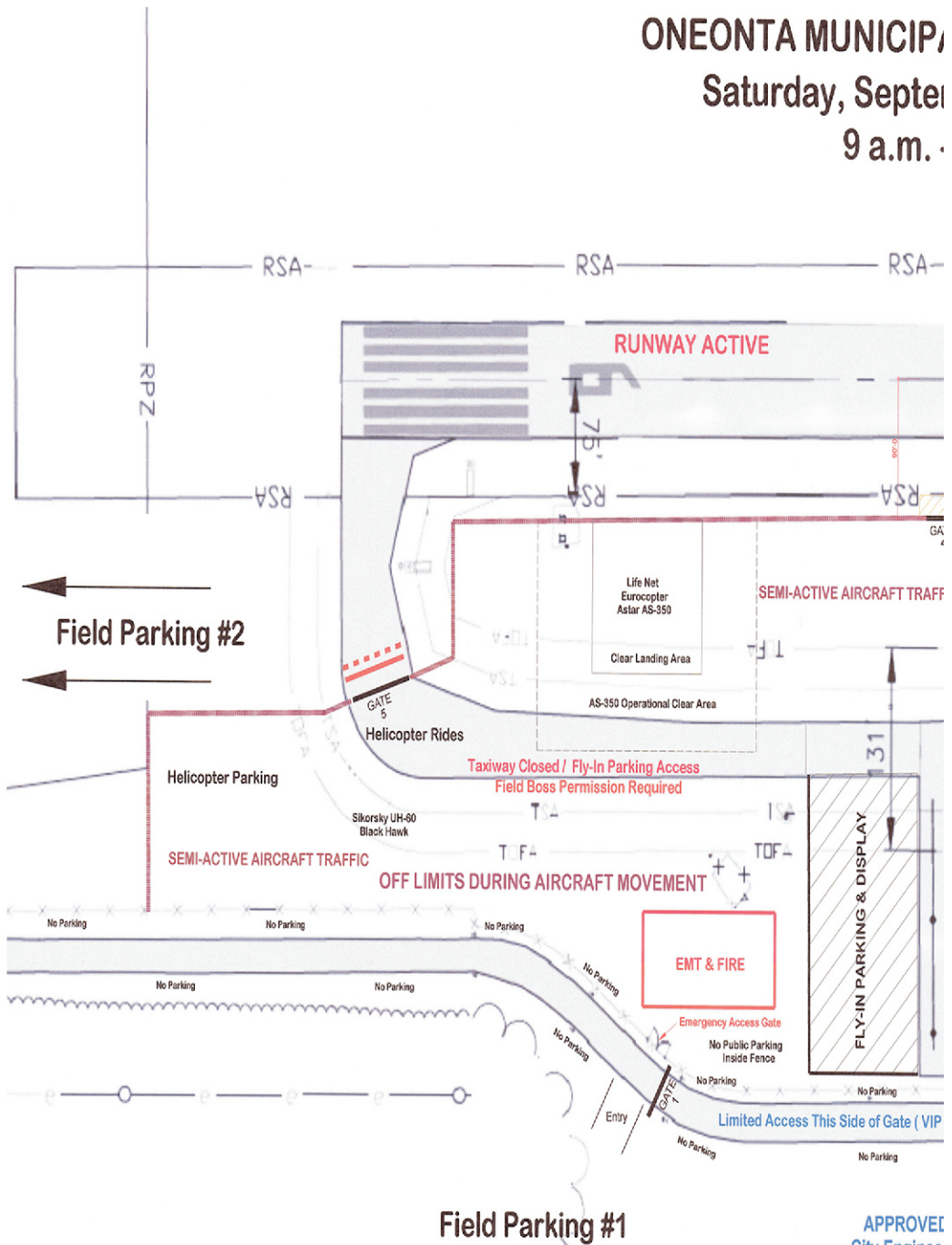
Oneonta City Police - Displays and Activity

Oneonta Fire Department - Displays and Activity

US Customs and Border Protection

* Activities are weather dependent

ONEONTA MUNICIPAL
 Saturday, September
 9 a.m.

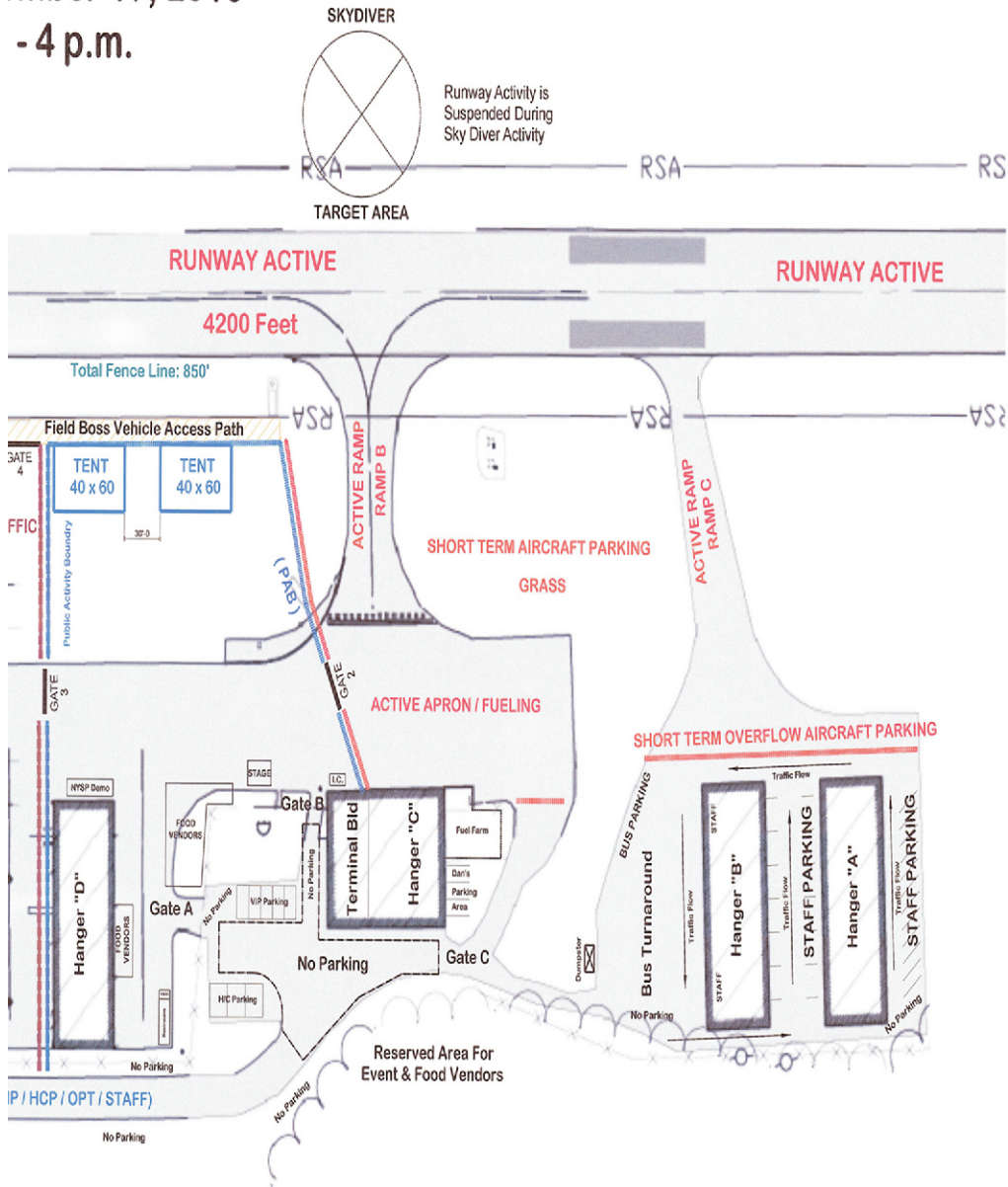


APPROVED
 City Engineer
 Sept

AL AIRPORT - N66

ember 17, 2016

- 4 p.m.



ED DRAWING
er & Fire Chief
pt 2016



*Thank You from
Ron Garan, Col. USAF (Ret)
Retired NASA Astronaut*

***Congratulations** on the 50th Anniversary of the Oneonta Airport. The Oneonta Airport has a very special place in my heart. It was on this beautiful hilltop airport that my journey into the air and out into space began.*

My first flight in an airplane was from the Oneonta Airport. I also vividly remember a beautiful summer evening just before dusk in 1982 when my flight instructor, Wolfgang Hutzel handed me the keys to a Cessna-150 and I took off from this airport on my first solo flight. It was a magical moment that started me on a journey that propelled me around our planet 2,842 times.

I also want to take this opportunity to thank Wolfgang for the outstanding instruction that I received under his mentor-ship. I mourn his loss along with all of my other friends and colleagues that have been lost to aircraft mishaps over the years.

As we thank those that came before us and who enabled success and progress, it's important to stress that the enormous benefits of a robust aviation capability dwarf the inherent risks of aviation. Just as the Oneonta Airport has played a very important role in my life and in the trajectory of my career, it also serves a critical role for the Oneonta community. The importance of a robust aviation capability cannot be overemphasized. The air transportation of goods, services and people has enormous implications for the economic development and overall well being of any community.

I hope when you look at the critical role that the Oneonta airport has played and continues to play for this community, you see the airport with the same fondness and respect that I do.

May the Oneonta Airport continue to serve the community and expand its capabilities and contributions to the region for decades to come.

A 50-year reflection on the Oneonta Municipal Airport

Mark Simonson, city historian

Air flight has its times of smooth passage through our skies. Then there are those times of turbulence. One might say the Oneonta Municipal Airport has seen its share of both throughout its “flight” of the first 50 years in our area.

Although the airport was dedicated on Sept. 17, 1966, having opened nearly a month earlier for business, getting this airport in place had been a challenge, years in the making.

As early as 1951, plans were under way to construct a new commercial airport in or near Oneonta, to replace Keyes Airport, located in the vicinity of today's New York State Electric and Gas and Browne Street businesses in Oneonta's West End. Considered by this time to be outdated, the Keyes Airport had been dedicated in August 1930.

There were several ideas and locations sought for the proposed airport in the early 1950s, but each time by what was then called the Civil Aeronautics Administration, the plans were turned down.

A first story of “turbulence” over the need for a new airport came in June 1954.

Gov. Thomas E. Dewey scheduled a trip to Oneonta to mark the dedication of the new Home Economics building on what was then called the Oneonta State Teachers' College campus, today's SUNY Oneonta.

Gov. Dewey traveled by airplane for the festive occasion. Unfortunately there was no place to land in Oneonta at that time. The building was dedicated on June 11. Had the ceremony taken place ten days earlier, the governor's airplane could have landed at Keyes Airport. Keyes closed on June 1. The plane had to land in Sidney, and a motorcade brought Gov. Dewey to Oneonta.

The search continued for a new site of an airport. In 1958 a presentation was given to the Otsego County Board of Supervisors about the county's participation in constructing an airport, but a 14-11 negative vote showed supervisors from northern and western townships voting against the proposal.

Meanwhile there were still plenty of private airplane owners in the area during the long transition between municipal airports, so a niche was somewhat filled in

in June 1959. Albert Fortin and Harold Feske opened a private airfield service, named F. & F. Airport. It was on the grounds of today's Fortin Park in Emmons. This helped air travelers somewhat while the Greater Oneonta Chamber of Commerce was still looking to build what they called an "executive type" airport. F. & F. Airport remained in operation until 1999.

During 1959, word came from Washington, D.C. that Oneonta and Otsego County had been certified as a regular stop for north-south Mohawk Airlines planes. The Chamber of Commerce and Mayor Albert S. Nader worked tirelessly to keep that certification valid while the search for an airport site continued. Two suitable sites for the construction had been found. The Chamber's Airport Committee urged city or county action to get the construction project underway. A federal grant had been approved for the airport, but no local funding was yet available to contribute to the project.

Once again, Otsego County government declined to participate in the construction in 1964. Almost immediately, the city decided to "go it alone" on the airport.

Mayor Nader said, "If we are going to grow, an airport is one of our fundamental needs. I'm only sorry the rest of the county doesn't recognize it," sticking with his goal, adding, "The airport was essential to the City and area in terms of economic growth."

The Oneonta Star reported on May 16, 1964 that the city was filing for federal approval for the airport site and for available 1965 Federal Aviation Administration funding. The Chamber of Commerce Transportation Committee had found the site for the airport in the town of Laurens, not far from Wilber Lake. The city had reached out to the towns of Milford and Laurens to partner in sharing the costs of building the airport, but each declined.

The Star reported on Oct. 16 that the FAA had allocated \$87,500 to pay for half the costs of the airport, the city paying the other half. Common Council gave its approval on Dec. 1 to authorize Mayor Nader to enter into contract to begin construction as soon as possible.

The land acquisition in the town of Laurens became a cause for a higher price tag. The Star of Feb. 17, 1965 told how the city's share in the airport had jumped to \$132,500. The city looked to the FAA for additional funds, which was approved.

Construction began the week of Aug. 2 and within a few weeks The Star said Stephen C. Low of Milford had given a proposal to build hangars and provide

services to the new airport in exchange for a long-term lease, 30 years. Low, as a businessman and aviator, spent \$50,000 of his own money for the terminal and hangar and \$3,000 a year for rent to the city.

Progress as winter approached was excellent, as Mayor Nader said, "Everything is complete except the final double thickness paving for the runway," which was set for completion in the spring. Nader also decided that month that the city should have an airport commission once the airport opened.

The Star then reported on Dec. 23 that the Appalachian Regional Commission had approved an additional \$40,200 to provide airport lighting, a beacon and tower and an additional 400 feet of runway, all to be completed in the 1966 construction season.

The Oneonta Municipal Airport had a "soft" opening on Aug. 18, 1966, after the FAA gave the green light for opening after inspection of the facilities was made.

"We're in business now," Low said in August after the opening. Low had revealed that week how Catskill Airways, Inc. would run 11 scheduled round trip flights to New York City and three to Syracuse, weekly.

On Saturday, Sept. 17, 1966, over 5,000 people visited the new airport at the formal dedication ceremonies.

"The sun shone brightly. The band played loudly. Politicians mingled freely. Civic leaders smiled proudly," The Oneonta Star reported on Monday morning.

Within a year, 3,256 passengers had flown on Catskill Airways, and weekly flights to LaGuardia Airport in New York City increased to 14.

Business was steady and increased in the 1970s. In the summer of 1977 the runway surface was repaved and strengthened to better facilitate larger, heavier aircraft. Two new hangars were built to house an overflow of private and corporate aircraft as space in the main hangar was no longer available.

By 1984 the city agreed to a \$5.65 million expansion plan over the next 20 years. The cost to the city was 2.5 percent or \$210,000, with the FAA contributing 90 percent and the state Department of Transportation covering the remaining 7.5 percent.

The city made another request to Otsego County for help in the airport in 1985, submitting a formal proposal that showed nearly half of the airplane riders were not from the city of Oneonta. The county again said no. Also that year, Catskill Airways expanded service to the Oneida County Airport in Utica, and Newark International Airport in New Jersey. Catskill's home base remained in Oneonta.

During 1987 Catskill scheduled more flights into Washington, D.C., while operating 14 flights a day to the capital and five other airports including Boston, LaGuardia, Newark, Utica and Long Island. Stephen Low announced plans to use larger planes holding twice as many passengers.

Heavy turbulence in many forms was ahead for Catskill Airways. Will Lunn, a former executive vice-president, had been with the company since the early years. The business was profitable into the 1970s he said, but the two Middle East oil crises of that decade made fuel costs skyrocket. An additional struggle came after airline deregulation took effect in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Lunn said that while the Airline Deregulation Act was designed to create competition, it actually killed it.

In 1989, Catskill was in trouble. In January, the airline cut its flights from 14 to three and let 11 employees go. Catskill moved its operation from Oneonta to Utica and later sold out to Mohawk Airlines, run by two Utica businessmen. In September, Mohawk gave up its Oneonta hangar space, and the era of commuter flights was over.

The Oneonta Municipal Airport continued to fly in and out of “turbulence” during the 1990s. There were already debates in 1991 on whether the airport should be improved, or closed and the property sold. There was interest generated by the Otsego County Chamber of Commerce in support of resuming a form of commuter air service. In 1992 and 1993, Oneonta Aviation Inc., followed by Otsego Airways resumed the service but only for a short time. City officials in 1992 were essentially told by the FAA that if they considered closing the airport, they would have to repay more than \$2 million in grants, as the agreement for those grants stipulated the city would maintain and operate the airport for at least 20 years.

Despite the turbulence, Oneonta city and business leaders considered the airport to be a drawing card for new industry. In 1998, Brad Curprier of Clipper Aviation, which managed the airport, said there were still many customers using the local facility. Politicians, artists, celebrities, corporate officers from Wal-Mart and Price Chopper, and parents of college students were among the users. That year, the city restated its support of a long-term master plan for the airport, developed in 1985. Clipper Aviation left the airport in 2011 after the city did not renew a contract for services.

Former Mayor Dick Miller said the airport would become self-operating on Jan. 1, 2012.

“The taxpayers of Oneonta have borne the costs of a regional airport,” Miller said. “All options for the airport remain open.” One option included its closing.

Dennis Finn is a recently appointed airport commissioner, as are Len Carson, Ed May and Jeff Back. As volunteers, the four are working to bring the airport back to prominence in the region.

“I was there at the dedication ceremony,” Finn said recently, and had worked on the environmental studies going into the 1966 construction. As an Oneonta native, “I just wouldn't allow it to close.”

Finn met with Mayor Miller, and was told that he could work on bringing it back, but there was no city money to help. The foursome, with good intentions, had no experience in running an airport and are still learning as they go. The commissioners got a \$50,000 anonymous donation from a woman with a family here, to get started. The foursome has been investing their own money into improvements.

Through contacts they've made, a partnership began in 2014 with the Oneonta Job Corps Academy. More than 100 students from various Job Corps departments got involved in refurbishing projects in the main terminal and hangars, building walls, installing electrical wiring and laying tile, among improvements made.

Senator James Seward announced a \$70,000 legislative grant to the airport in 2015, and said the renovated facility would support economic development, such as attracting business locally.

Finn said one of the first things a company or developer looking to locate in our area asks is, “Do you have an airport?”

A second aircraft taxiway to the runway is being completed in 2016.

Finn said the FAA continues to fund the airport up to \$150,000 annually, and by receiving the funds, the airport cannot simply close down. He said there is a good relationship with the FAA now, which had been dormant in years following the Catskill Airways departure.

Finn and the airport commissioners feel the Oneonta Municipal Airport remains a valuable asset to the city and the region.

“The region needs to recognize the airport,” Finn said. “It'll take time for it to be recognized again,” after some turbulent years.

“The outlook is good,” he said. “We wouldn't be involved if we didn't think it has a good future.”

Airport Commissioners

Jeff Back
Len Carson
Dennis Finn
Ed May

50th Celebration Steering Committee

Jeff Back
Bob Brzozowski
Len Carson
Alan Donovan
Adina Feliu
Dennis Finn
Lester Grummons
Larry Guzy
Barbara Ann Heegan
Rachel Lutz Jessup
Chris Kuhn
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John Rafter
Mike Stevens

Special Thanks to

Dan Bentley
Chuck D'Imperio
Ron Garan - Retired NASA Astronaut
Major General Anthony P. German
Mayor Gary Herzig and Members of the Oneonta Common Council
Jim Kevlin
Ken Meifert
Michelle Osterhoudt
Bob Parmerter
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