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A Bonanza of Opportunity

Wood County Airport Collins Field is a boon for Northeast Texas

THERE'S A LITTLE-KNOWN spread of asphalt about halfway between Mineola and Quitman that sends travelers up and over the clouds to distant places and generates vital economic opportunities for a slice of Northeast Texas. A smidge over 4,000 feet long and 60 feet wide, the runway at Collins Field is used about 50 times a day—brisk for a regional airport of its size—and attracts economic opportunities from far and wide.

“A mile of road will take you 1 mile, but a mile of runway will take you anywhere,” says John Wisdom, a chiropractor, airport board member and owner of Aviation Wisdom, a flight school based at the airport. “And just like most pieces of the Texas highway, there is no charge to use the runway.”

The runway at KJDD, the call letters for Collins Field, is actually a piece of state highway, owned and maintained by the Texas Department of Transportation Aviation Division. The hive of activity around the 106-acre airport is owed to a true partnership between municipalities, the state of Texas and several private citizens.

Wood County and the cities of Quitman and Mineola own the field and lease some of the property for privately built and owned aircraft hangars, currently numbering 36 but with room for nine more. Day-to-day operations and upkeep of the

grounds and airport terminal are overseen by a nine-member volunteer board.

General aviation airports like Collins Field provide vital connections between rural and less-remote parts of Texas, giving rural residents and business owners more convenient access to locales that would be too time-consuming to reach by car.

In service since 1983, the Wood County Airport was renamed in May 2017 as Wood County Airport Collins Field, in honor of Wayne Collins, an esteemed local businessman and philanthropist who died in January 2019 at the age of 94. Wisdom considered Collins a friend and mentor and speaks of him with reverence.

After Collins returned from service in the Navy during World War II, he joined his family's business and expanded it into a chain of three fine clothing stores. “Wayne's stores were the Neiman Marcus of East Texas,” Wisdom says. To stay on top of trends, Collins would frequently travel to New York, piloting his 1972 Bonanza airplane.

On one return trip, weather forced Collins to make an emergency landing on a highway instead. Despite his injuries, he climbed from the plane and directed traffic so no one else would be hurt.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN WISDOM

1. John Wisdom in his hangar with his pristine rebuilt 1972 Bonanza, which as tribute to his friend and mentor, still bears the name of its previous owner, Wayne Collins, who twice flew it around the world.

2. Just steps from the aircraft day parking, the terminal at Wood County Airport offers inviting and comfortable meeting spaces, a lounge, and other amenities.

3. On a clear day, as seen from Wisdom's cockpit, 4,000 feet of runway beckons visitors and economic prosperity to rural East Texas.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JOHN WISDOM

That accident became the catalyst for Collins' efforts to improve the Wood County airport. Through a multiyear, dedicated effort, the facility became an important economic engine for the area. Today, like-minded individuals carry on Collins' vision and work by continuing to expand and improve the airport's facilities.

Some 50 planes and helicopters, mostly belonging to local business owners, are now permanently based at Collins Field. The airport is also home to several flight schools and aircraft service and maintenance companies, including Aviation Wisdom, Robinson Helicopter Service, Enstrom Helicopter Service and East Texas Flying Service, which also owns and maintains the 24/7 self-service fuel pumps.

The terminal facilities at Collins Field house a planning area and a pilots' lounge with Wi-Fi, cable TV, a kitchenette, lobby and conference room as well as the office of the Wood County Economic Development Commission. The airport also owns a couple of donated cars that are available to incoming aircraft travelers for day use within Wood County. In short, Collins Field extends a warm welcome to the world with extra conveniences.

"Most people don't realize how much goes on here," Wisdom says. "This little airport out here is a major transportation hub and one of the reasons the job creators and the business owners can live here and remain successful." He cites an array of important activities that rely on the airport, including medivac operations, energy production, crop dusting and visits by executives

from major agricultural firms. "A lot of people are helped by this airport, and they don't even know it," he says.

Collins Field also is a fueling and service bay for several emergency medical helicopters, and when patients need to travel long distances or require faster flying speeds, the airport serves as an operational base for air ambulances. Similarly, many of the aircraft owners participate at their own expense in a program called Angel Flight, providing free air transportation to hospitals and treatment sites for those who can't afford or otherwise can't be accommodated by commercial flights. The gift of private air travel shortens trips by hours, allowing patients to reach and return home from treatment more easily.

Some pilots based at Collins Field also participate in Young Eagles, an organization that introduces children to general aviation. It's a way for the pilots to share their interest in aviation, by giving young people their first airplane rides, and in doing so, inspiring the next generation of pilots.

"This airport is really the gateway for Wood County," says Randy Bateman, chairman of the airport board. "This airport is laid out so well. In preplanning they really did a great job."

Nevertheless, the airport continues to improve as money becomes available. Expanded aircraft parking and a new taxiway should be completed next year. There are also plans to add 1,000 feet to the runway to accommodate larger jets, an enticement for businesses considering relocating to the area. The board hopes to complete that project within the next 10 years.

"As our businesses grow, I'll need a bigger aircraft that will



Ace mechanic Brandon Powell completes a thorough inspection of a helicopter in for maintenance.

believes, will allow more investment in Wood County and the region.

On a broader level, Wood County Airport offers something that isn't as common as it once was: a home for noncommercial and recreational flying—sometimes called general aviation.

"There's a lot of freedom, as long as you follow the rules," Wisdom says. "You can go out and get in your airplane and go wherever you want to go." That's not so often the case outside of the United States. According to Wisdom, general aviation has become somewhat of a lost art because of privatization in many places.

"Each time you talk on the radio, they charge your account," he says. "Every time you land at an airfield, they charge your account. It has become extremely costly to fly there." That and other restrictions and limitations, he says, are why the U.S. has become the largest pilot trainer.

Wood County Airport, and others like it, reduces or eliminates those costly barriers. "It's such an easy place to come

fly faster and carry more people," says local business owner Brian Steck. The lengthened runway, he

and go," Wisdom says. "People don't realize who comes to Wood County." In addition to business-related travel, he says, famous entertainers and professional athletes come in and out to see property or visit family. "This little airport out here is the transportation link to the surrounding areas—and the world, basically."

It's as clear as the blues skies over Texas that Collins Field strengthens essential services, emergency operations, educational opportunities, commerce, and even tourism and leisure activities in the region. There may not be any road signs posted in the highway in the sky, but if there were, they'd surely say, "Opportunity just ahead in Wood County." ■

Wood County Airport Collins Field

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5 Home Energy Hogs

EVEN THOUGH TWO HOMES may have many similarities, there may be hidden energy hogs causing one home's utility bills to be higher. Here are five energy hogs that increase energy use.

1. An old fridge or freezer in the garage. That second refrigerator or freezer may be costing more than you think. If the model was produced prior to 1990, it's likely using twice as much energy (or more!) than a newer Energy Star-rated model. If it's located in the garage, it may run constantly in the summer, which leads to higher electric bills.

2. Cooling or heating an uninsulated area. Cooling or heating an uninsulated workshop or garage can be expensive. If you really want to heat or cool these types of spaces, insulate them.

3. Hot tub. The cost to operate a hot tub can be exponentially higher if it's an older, less efficient model. A smaller hot tub with better insulation, a cover and a pump that runs on a lower voltage will use less energy. In the end, getting a "good deal" on a used hot tub may cost more in energy bills in the long run.

4. Swimming pool. If you have a pool, consider installing a smaller, more efficient pump and reducing how often it runs. You can also look at installing a larger filter and maximizing the flow of water through the pipes by making them larger. These measures could cut your electric use for the pool pump by as much as 75%. Consult with a pool installation specialist to find the most efficient setup that will still keep your pool clean.

5. Pumps. If you live on acreage or a farm, you probably have several pumps, including irrigation, well, septic and sump. You probably use those pumps until they break down. Consider replacing the oldest and most-used pumps over time with more efficient ones that are sized correctly for their task. ■



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