

Garrett Airport Gets a Facelift

NEW EXPANSION MEANS MORE BUSINESS AND RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR GARRETT COUNTY

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Skeeter Bowman with his red Taylor Craft plane.

This plane, and a display featuring Skeeter and McHenry in their earlier days, can be seen at Bear Creek Traders in McHenry.

A RED SINGLE-ENGINE TAYLORCRAFT BC 65 AIRPLANE CAN BE SEEN CIRCLING ABOVE DEEP CREEK LAKE. The pilot slowly turns the aircraft and starts a descent toward McHenry, Maryland, making a final approach toward gently sloping farmland. The plane touches down at Bowman's dairy farm property along U.S. Route 219, and gently bounces across the grass field marked with several orange windsocks. The pilot slowly taxis toward a tie-down area and then steps from the plane. Upon descent, he quickly secures the plane and proceeds to walk down a gentle slope toward Deep Creek Lake, Bowman's General Store, and the Post Office. Such was a day in the life of Deep Creek Lake's airport in the 1950's.

Charles "Skeeter" Bowman was the Garrett County World War II veteran and flying enthusiast who converted a section of the family dairy farm into a landing strip that served recreational flyers and a few local business owners. Mr. Bowman has subsequently witnessed many changes over the years, including the construction and expansion of modern airport facilities two miles from the family farm.

The most recent expansion of Garrett County's Airport connects the region with exciting business and recreational opportunities. Fly-in vacations and quick business trips are now possible at Maryland's mountain top airport because an expanded runway and other improvements have created a user friendly and versatile facility.

The airport's 3,000 foot runway was lengthened to 5,000 feet, and outfitted with night lights and a parallel taxiway. Gone is the old terminal building, having been replaced with a modern facility that features a pilot lounge and passenger amenities, including a television, periodicals, and a snack area. Offices and meeting rooms



The first airfield at Deep Creek Lake (above) was part of the Bowman dairy farm; now part of the Garrett County Fairgrounds.



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add to the facilities business purposes, while a pilot planning room is complete with internet access, navigational aids, and the Automatic Weather Observation Station (AWOS). According to airport manager, Edward Kelly, “This system gives pilots the opportunity to pick up weather before taking off, while flying, or even checking conditions at other airports. Quite a few people have asked about getting their small jets and airplanes in here. Now business owners are able to fly to Garrett County. The new airport facilities are also useful for promoting tourism and fostering second home ownership; some private homeowners fly to Garrett County from Florida and South Carolina.”

Mr. Kelly points out that a twin-engine King Air plane needed exactly 3,000 feet for take-off and landings. During marginal weather conditions, pilots became apprehensive, especially with a loaded aircraft. Now it will be easier for pilots to use the facility. With the extended runway, the airport is accessible to jets carrying as many as 30 passengers.

Twelve new T-hangers are being constructed with the possibility of more in the future. Currently, 15 single-engine planes are based at the airport. Various types of aviation fuels are available, including Jet A. Fuel trucks stand ready for serving planes on the runway. Additional improvements include dusk to dawn lighting, Papi Precision, GPS and VOR Approaches. Physical improvements are supported by staff personnel on duty from 8 am to 6 pm, seven days a week.

Garrett County business owners agree the expanded access and facilities improvements will benefit their enterprises. Previously, some of the larger aircraft landed in

Morgantown, West Virginia, or other nearby airports to pick up passengers and supplies intended for Garrett County businesses. Passengers and supplies are now only two miles from Deep Creek Lake hotels, restaurants and other facilities. And the airport is just 13 miles from the town of Oakland, the county seat and population center.

Ernest Gregg, President of the Garrett County Commissioners, stated, “The airport will help economic development because many home based businesses are already located around the county. Many were established because the owners had airport access. Personally, I am very supportive of the airport’s expansion.”

Gregg, like other businessmen, recognized the need for improvements because he, too, had to use other airports. Consequently, Commissioner Gregg became involved in a previous airport expansion in the late 1980’s. At that time the commissioners formed an airport advisory group comprised of local pilots, business representatives, and interested citizens with the purpose of surveying the airport’s needs. According to Mr. Kelly, “They gave us advice and suggested changes. Local pilots told us what they thought was needed.” Garrett County officials responded to their requests and concerns.

While upgrades and expansions at the Garrett County Airport have brought many changes, at least one tradition lives on. If one watches closely, “Skeeter” Bowman’s single engine aircraft may be seen circling above McHenry, preparing for a final approach toward the airport at Deep Creek Lake.