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Local businesses take flight with private planes at Dubuque airport

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Jul 31, 2022



Metro Creative

Photo by: Metro Creative

On a sunny Thursday afternoon, a business-owned light jet unfurled its landing gear and touched down gently onto the runway at Dubuque Regional Airport.

Soon after the plane's handful of passengers disembarked, it took off again for another destination.

"That's the part of the airport a lot of people don't see," airport Director Todd Dalsing said as he watched the plane take off. "There's a lot more going on at the airport than just commercial flights."

Business travel makes up much of the daily jet traffic at Dubuque Regional Airport.

In 2021, the airport reported 77,568 operations — instances in which an aircraft takes off or lands — many of which are prop plane flights by University of Dubuque students.

On average, the airport sees about 10 jet operations per day, with two to four of those being commercial flights from American Airlines, though the airline announced last month that it will end service to Dubuque on Sept. 7. The remainder are for private, business-owned jets.

The impact of business travel at Dubuque Regional Airport can be seen on the property. Towering hangars loom over the apron in the general aviation section of the airport. Some are branded with the logos of local companies.

Dalsing said Dubuque Regional Airport has six executive hangars with a total 22,400 square feet of storage space.

The logo for Dubuque-headquartered Cottingham & Butler is displayed above the doors on one of the larger hangars.

"We will usually be flying at least one airplane out five days a week," said Andrew Butler, executive chairman of Cottingham & Butler. "Sometimes, all three airplanes will be out two to three days a week."

Cottingham & Butler first invested in flying its own aircraft out of Dubuque Regional Airport in the early 1990s. Today, the company operates three planes and employs eight pilots.

Butler said the company relies on private jets to safely and quickly transport employees to meetings that would require significantly more travel time with a regular commercial flight.

“The bulk of our flights are to places without major hubs,” Butler said. “What we can do in one day now would take three to four days on a commercial flight.”

Dalsing said a primary goal of airport staff is to ensure the flights companies regularly conduct go as smoothly as possible. Every day, staff are responsible for keeping the airport’s taxiways and runway clear and maintained, managing air traffic control and ensuring airport safety.

Airport staff also work to make a strong impression on business officials first arriving into the airport, Dalsing said. A red carpet literally is rolled out for people departing private jets on the apron.

“We are the first and last thing that business owners are going to see when they come to Dubuque,” Dalsing said. “If there is a business thinking about investing here, it’s important that we impress them.”

Ryan Sempf, vice president of government and external affairs at Dubuque Area Chamber of Commerce, said the airport plays a major role in supporting local businesses and making a strong impression for potential new investors in the community.

“They have a beautiful facility that everyone coming through there gets to see,” Sempf said. “It’s a big asset for the community.”

Much of the work to maintain the planes is performed by the companies, including maintenance and fueling. Butler said local business Blue Skies Over Dubuque can conduct minor maintenance at the airport. Some regular maintenance does require the planes to be flown to Milwaukee, however.

Butler said maintaining a local company fleet requires time and money, but it is a worthwhile investment in both ensuring employee efficiency and promoting a healthy work-life balance. Through the company's private jets, employees are able to leave in the morning, conduct business in the afternoon and be home by the evening. Without a private jet, that same work could take multiple days.

“What we do takes a lot of energy, and one of the primary motivations is to get our people in and out,” Butler said. “We think it's a significant benefit for our team when they are not spending a lot of time on the road or at an airport.”

Butler said that mentality is unlikely to change. Though online communication through video conferencing has grown in popularity since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies investing in private business travel still believe in the importance of face-to-face meetings.

“I think most businesses are still highly dependent on relationships,” Butler said. “That first initial meeting or two needs to be in person. It is uncommon to change or even develop a relationship based only on talking on Zoom.”