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# The Elbert Files: Airport history, part 1

 [Dave Elbert](#) | Sep 22, 2023 | 6:00 am | 3 min read time | 679 words | [Opinion \(https://www.businessrecord.com/category/opinion/\)](#), [The Elbert Files \(https://www.businessrecord.com/category/elbert-files/\)](#)

Polk County voters will decide the future of Des Moines International Airport on Nov. 7.

Passage that day of a ballot issue for \$350 million of airport bonds will secure funding for a new terminal that is expected to be the most expensive building ever constructed in Iowa.

Plans for the terminal and related work have bounced around for nearly a decade with price tags ranging from more than \$700 million to a current, scaled-back estimate of \$445 million.

With that in mind, here is part one of a two-part history of the airport.

July 1, 1925, was the day airmail arrived in Des Moines. The temperature hit 104 degrees and was still in the 90s at dusk when 40,000 to 50,000 people piled into vehicles and headed to a grassy field just outside the city limits on Vandana Road, east of 30th Street.

"At 9:50 p.m.," the Des Moines Tribune reported, "a single-engine plane from Chicago dropped out of a darkening sky" and into the beams of giant searchlights before landing on the grass. Twenty minutes later, two planes loaded with new mail were on their way to Omaha.

Six years earlier, the Des Moines business community had been among the earliest in the nation to recognize the potential for flight, and the Chamber of Commerce had created an "air committee."

The city needed an airfield but was legally barred from spending public money on an airport. The city could, however, acquire parkland beyond city limits, which it did with help from the chamber.

Unfortunately, the first Des Moines Aviation Park was bottomland prone to flooding. Soon, a better site was located near Altoona on land where Prairie Meadows Racetrack and Casino is now located.

Des Moines' second Aviation Park opened Aug. 29, 1927, just three months after Charles Lindbergh made his historic solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, Lindbergh flew his Spirit of St. Louis airplane to Des Moines for the dedication. The estimated 50,000 spectators on hand followed Lindbergh to the Hotel Fort Des Moines, creating what was described as "the longest parade in Iowa history."

Two years later, legislation was passed to license airports and pilots. At the urging of the Des Moines Chamber of Commerce, the new law also allowed cities to levy assessments and sell bonds for airports.

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City officials were already looking for a closer location. They considered 80 possible sites in 1931 before issuing \$200,000 in bonds and buying a 160-acre farm at the intersection of Army Post Road and Fleur Drive. The site was just beyond the city limits but was annexed in 1955.

There wasn't much money at first, causing the airport's first director, Arthur Thomas, a draftsman in the city's engineering department, to get creative and "borrow" equipment and supplies from other city agencies. Airport records said Thomas "collected nuts, bolts and other items from family and friends and used them to keep grading equipment and other machinery running."

Roughly 250,000 yards of dirt were moved to create the first two runways. Two more runways were soon added.

By 1940, the Des Moines airport was rated as one of the four best in the nation.

Idaho-based United Airlines provided the first passenger service in the early 1930s with a 10-passenger Boeing 247 airplane that carried airmail between New York and San Francisco. In 1940, a second carrier, which later became Braniff International Airways, provided service to Minneapolis, Omaha and Bismarck, N.D.

The earliest piece of the current terminal was built in 1948. Multiple expansions followed.

In 1941, Chamber of Commerce director John D. Adams persuaded the War Department to locate an Air National Guard base here, significantly expanding the size and profile of the Des Moines airport.

In 2014, the Des Moines guard base switched from flying jets to handling unmanned drones, opening up space that changed the proposed location of a new terminal and significantly reduced its cost.

I'll write more about how that happened, how airport plans evolved during the past decade and what to expect in the future in part two.

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**Dave Elbert (mailto:daveelbert@bpcdm.com)**


Dave Elbert is a columnist for Business Record.

**EMAIL THE WRITER (MAILTO:DAVEELBERT@BPCDM.COM)**

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