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News

It's a Bird! It's a Plane!

Despite major opposition, construction commences on what could become North America's most dangerous airport

By Ford Gunter

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Since 1962, the Air Rice field in west Houston has been a dirt crop-duster airstrip surrounded by rice fields. Today, a lone, faded wind sock stands stiff in the brisk winter breeze. Hawks and raptors fly low, scouring the shrinking grasslands for prey. It's a Monday in early December, and across a barren tract of 1,980 acres, tractors, trucks and earth-moving equipment rumble about, dust trails billowing behind on the southerly wind. They're clearing space for what could one day become North America's most dangerous airport.

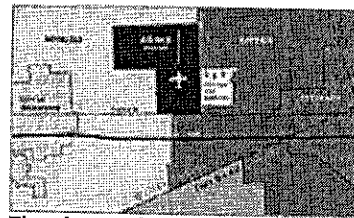
Tucked between Katy and Brookshire among quietly disappearing rice farms, the site hardly looks menacing now. But it's on its way to becoming a business-aviation mecca, the privately funded pipe dream of Ron Henriksen, a former corporate pilot who made his fortune in telecommunications. He's already received Federal Aviation Administration approval, and since it's a private airport and he's footing the entire bill, Henriksen is moving ahead as planned despite public outcry, to which he seems deaf.

"We know of very few people who oppose the project," Henriksen said in response to questions e-mailed through his lawyer, Drew Coats. "A few people have actively tried to spread false rumors about the project, but we have been speaking to community groups for almost a year about the project, and when

Al Cameron



The area has one of the highest bird-strike probabilities on the continent.



The airport site is right next to Katy ISD, but the district won't see any tax money from it. [Click here to enlarge.](#)

Details

Who / What:
Air Rice field

Printer friendly version of this story



people hear what we are actually saying, almost everybody has been supportive."

Almost everybody.

At a presentation last month to the Katy Area Economic Development Council, one former pilot in attendance angrily pointed out that one airplane depicted in the slideshow looked like a Boeing 737.

Nope, just the world's largest private jet, a Beechcraft King Air. "The Suburban of the corporate fleet," Coats said to scattered guffaws. The pilot wasn't laughing.

In almost every protest, the first salvo fired is about bird-strike probability -- the likelihood of a bird colliding with an airplane. In March, FAA wildlife biologist Ed Cleary visited the site at the request of Ben Guttery, the FAA's senior program manager at the Texas Airports Development Office. It was his second visit to the site, the first having been in 1996, when he recommended against an airport in an adjacent pasture.

In an FAA memorandum dated June 29, 2005, Cleary wrote, "In my 1996 report, I stated that, 'If at a later time the situation markedly changes, i.e. major urbanization and resulting significant decreases in the numbers of waterfowl wintering the area, this recommendation [against development of the proposed airport] should be reevaluated.' During the 2005 visit, there did not appear to be any large-scale urban development in the Katy Prairie and resultant decrease in waterfowl."

Though Cleary, who is considered the leading expert in the nation regarding bird strikes, conceded that the numbers of snow geese and of most other large species in the vicinity of the field had decreased between visits, he wrote that the number of birds in the area was "still significant" and that counts indicated that the number had leveled off over the past two or three years.

"Within the Katy Brookshire Prairie area, I believe it is safe to say the wildlife aircraft strike potential is just as serious today as it was in 1996," Cleary wrote.

His memorandum included a list of recommendations, which the FAA repeated in a determination letter to project engineer Frank McIllwain dated July 12, 2005, offering tentative approval, but with three conditions: Air traffic should be restricted to the east side of the airport, an air-traffic pattern of at least 800 feet should be maintained, and a Wildlife Hazard Management Plan should be instituted. The plan would help make the land as inhospitable as possible to birds and other wildlife by eliminating standing water and tall grass, moving the airport's runway system as far south as possible, stopping all rice farming, installing automated gates and/or cattle guards, hiring a wildlife hazard manager and installing a bird-detection radar system.

All of which Henriksen and Coats said they are either doing or looking into. Henriksen hired a Steven W. Carothers & Associates environmental consultant

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this week in News

Feature

Cyber Sunday

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Letters

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Image of the Week

Houston Garden Center

named Brian Fairchild to make the Air Rice site unattractive to birds. The problem, critics say, is that Fairchild is also employed by the City of Houston to bring birds back to a mitigation site just 5,000 feet north of the airport.

"It's the most true sense of conflict I've seen in years," said Chris Sagstetter of the Texas Committee on Natural Resources.

"I don't think that's a good description of [SWCA's] role," Coats rebutted. "I don't know that I would describe their role as being hired to bring birds back to the area. It's more custodial."

"SWCA is a good firm, but I don't know how they're going to be able to justify a bird attractor like the mitigation site adjacent to an airport," said Mary Anne Piacentini, executive director of the Katy Prairie Conservancy.

Other organizations that bill themselves as environmentally friendly, such as the National Rifle Association and Ducks Unlimited, are upset as well.

"I'm very aware of the bird-strike," said Houston Audubon Society executive director W.O. King, a former navy pilot. "I would personally be concerned."

Cleary agrees. "There are better places to build an airport," he said in a November phone interview. He cited a 2002 U.S. Air Force Bird Aircraft Strike Hazard Team evaluation of potential Waller County sites that named the southern part of Waller County, closest to Air Rice, as the worst of all possible locations. He also cited an analysis by BASH's Dr. Ron Merritt utilizing the Air Force's Bird Avoidance Model.

"The results indicate that the proposed site would be in a severe rating for bird strikes 50 percent of the year," Merritt wrote. "There are few places in North America that have such a high rating for that extended period of time."

Though most of the outspoken opposition paints an apocalyptic picture of turbines inhaling geese and planes dropping out of the sky onto schools and homes, the reality is that only a tiny fraction of all reported animal strikes result in significant damage to the aircraft, and most strikes occur on the ground or at low altitude.

In the last 15 years, the FAA has reported only 12 planes that have crashed because of an animal strike.

It's a platform that Henriksen -- who, along with Coats, openly disputes Cleary's findings -- uses to dispel the doomsday prognosticators.

"I think the people who are talking about bird strikes today know that this will not be a dangerous airport, but use the issue as an emotional means of trying to stop a private development on private land," he wrote in an e-mail.

That does little to assuage the concerns of area residents, especially in the Remington Trails subdivision of Katy, which borders the site to the east, exactly where the FAA has relegated the air-traffic patterns.

"There are tons of geese out there right now," said Remington Trails resident Karen Murray, an admittedly nonvocal opponent of the airport. "You can hear them flying over."

Murray -- who, like other opponents, is quick to point out that the site borders the migratory flyway for the endangered whooping crane -- also flies a lot with her job at BP.

"In these small planes, if you accidentally suck one of those birds into your

engine, the plane has to go down. When planes go down -- and planes do go down -- most go down near the airport. That's within the City of Katy if all the air traffic is east. Regardless of whether it's a bird strike or engine failure, it's not *if* it will happen, it's *when* it will happen."

The low incident rate doesn't do much to put some members of the FAA at ease, either.

"Aviation works off of low numbers," said Hank Price, of the FAA's public relations department. "To say 12 accidents in 15 years...any accident is high for us."

With so much criticism focusing on the bird-strike possibility, the question is why the FAA granted approval after one of its own warned of the danger.

Murray thinks the agency's hands were tied.

Since Henriksen didn't apply for instrument-landing-system approval, Murray said, "The FAA had to approve it because the airspace was already approved for crop dusters. For what Henriksen wants that airport to be -- a jetport -- he doesn't have the approval."

"The FAA approval we received was to redesignate the airport from private access to public access and to pave it to 4,500 feet in length," Coats allowed. "To construct the first phase."

Meaning there will be future FAA hurdles to clear if Henriksen is going to get his airport the way he wants it.

Of course, with any major commercial development, there are benefits to the community. Though recreational private aircraft are not taxable entities, those used for business purposes are. The more valuable the plane and the more departures it clocks from the airport, the more tax money the area gets. In their presentations, Coats and Henriksen cite a statistic from the McKinney Economic Development Corporation that states that one corporate jet based at Collin County Regional Airport offers the same property-tax yield of a seven-story, class-A office building. That airport is expected to contribute almost \$3 million in property taxes in its first year.

That's all well and good for Waller County, Katy residents say. The Air Rice site lies within Royal Independent School District, meaning it would stand to benefit the most. But since the planes will be coming and going to the east, "the City of Katy gets all the air traffic, but Katy ISD doesn't get a dime in terms of tax money," Murray said. Murray's neighborhood, Remington Trails, is in KISD, meaning the school district servicing the children close to the airport will get nothing.

And more schools could be on the way. According to a *Katy Times* article from November 9, KISD is eyeing land for two schools near the airport. One lot southeast of the site could be home to the district's ninth high school, opening sometime after 2012. Another parcel just north of Morton Road and Remington Trails -- and in the vicinity of the air-traffic pattern -- could be home to KISD's 35th elementary school by 2010.

Coats denies Katy's air-traffic issues, saying that only visual-flight-rules traffic -- essentially, pilots flying with their eyes instead of instruments -- will fly east of the runway. The plan is for that traffic to fly over the undeveloped land between Remington Trails and Katy High School, keeping planes a quarter-mile from the

neighborhood.

"You don't have to fly over Remington Trails to fly a VFR traffic pattern," Coats said. And those are only aircraft that have to circle or bank after takeoff or on approach. Many will simply enter and exit to the north or south.

Corporate relocation is a buzzword in Katy. The Katy Area Economic Development Council's new president, Lance LaCour, has made no secret that corporate relos are his No. 1 goal for the area. Henriksen and Coats say a major business-aviation center will be irresistible bait to corporations looking for greener pastures. It's no wonder, then, that the featured speakers at the first KAEDC General Assembly LaCour chaired were Henriksen and Coats.

"I know firsthand what business aviation can do for a community," LaCour said while introducing them. At the time, the KAEDC was not aware of Cleary's FAA memorandum, and said it had not chosen a side in the debate.

"We're going to bring it before our next meeting in December," LaCour said. "We're still in the process of doing some research on it ourselves."

In fact, no one in Katy seems all that eager to voice support. Chamber of Commerce president and CEO Ann Hodge, who grew up next to a private airport in Santa Monica, California, said she appreciates both sides of the debate and personally falls somewhere in the middle, though she anticipates the chamber will support the airport eventually.

"If we can get corporate jets out here, then what's to say we can't get a corporate relocation?" she said.

The Waller County Economic Development Partnership is not taking a side either, though executive director Vince Yokom seems supportive.

"We have no official position," he said. "We try not to come out politically, but it seems like the privately funded [airports] do better."

Yokom mentioned the City of Tomball's efforts to take over David Wayne Hooks Airport, saying if the city wants to take it over, it must be a good thing.

On the flip side, if the airport is doing so well, why would the owners want to sell?

"I'm paying more attention to [Henriksen's] proposed business park," Yokom said. "That could be extremely valuable to the community. It's a perfect location for a business park."

Katy-area politicians are equally noncommittal. Mayor Doyle Callender said the city is still conducting its own inquiries. State Representative Bill Callegari (R-Katy) said he is taking a "wait-and-see attitude" and that none of his constituents has called to express concern. Callegari's District 132 ends at the western edge of Harris County, bordering Waller County. Like the rest, he seems to think that money will win out.

"Economic success usually dictates what happens," he said.

Henriksen said that he's already heard from several companies interested in relocating airplanes or building facilities at the airport.

Despite the potential economic windfall, state Representative Glenn Hegar (R-Katy) said his constituents for the most part don't want the airport, but the best

thing they can do is work with Henriksen to ensure all their concerns are addressed.

"To benefit the community, work with the man, not against the man," he said. "High-dollar jobs are what Katy needs, what the school district needs. Not more houses but more businesses."

National congressmen seem to be more willing to take a stand. U.S. Representatives Michael McCaul (R-Houston) and Ron Paul (R-Lake Jackson) sent two letters in July, first to Congress and then to their constituents, expressing concern over the airport. Included in the letter to Congress were specific issues dealing with the City of Houston's Westside Airport Wildlife Mitigation site being within 5,000 feet of the proposed Air Rice site, much closer than the FAA's recommended separation of at least 10,000 feet between an airport serving turbine aircraft and wildlife attractants.

Congressman John Culberson (R-Houston) initially signed the letter too, but removed his name pending a private meeting with Coats and Henriksen. After that August 9 meeting, Culberson remained opposed to the airport but didn't put his name back on the letter. His press secretary, Tony Essalih, said he'd elected not to because the airport wasn't in his district.

Like the potential noise from air traffic, other issues -- accurate acreage estimates, allegations of politicians in back pockets, and jet-fuel spills seeping into the groundwater -- boil down to he-said-she-said tiffs, but there is one major question that Coats and Henriksen cannot answer definitively.

"Will he really fund it privately, or will there eventually be some public involvement?" asked the Katy Prairie Conservancy's Piacentini. "If so, we shouldn't go through the back door. Do you just plop it down, or do you look at social, wildlife, economic and water- and air-quality issues?"

When asked to confirm that no government money would be spent -- if it were, the airport would open up to commercial or cargo operation -- neither Henriksen nor Coats could.

"I'm reticent to guarantee anything," Coats said. "I can't tell you what will happen 25 to 30 years in the future. Nobody knows what's going to happen."

"Federal grants generally are not available to privately owned airports," Henriksen said. Grants "also tend to come with a lot of restrictions and conditions that may dilute my ability to control the growth and character of the airport," he added.

"Ron envisions having the airport owned in a trust-type vehicle," Coats said.

Opponents know they're facing an uphill battle. Sagstetter's organization, the Texas Committee on Natural Resources, is trying to raise money for a map to identify everything that would be impacted within five miles of the airport. "Citizens should have the opportunity to weigh in on these projects that are going to vastly affect their lives," said Sagstetter.

In the end, though, she knows the real power lies not with the people but with the politicians who represent them. "It's going to be a political decision," she said. "It's going to be up to the people to tell their congressman."

Nevertheless, pending FAA approval of the instrument-landing system and tower plans, which opponents say will be harder to squash once Henriksen has begun

significant construction, the airport is happening.

"It's a done deal," said Coats, who with Henriksen continues to give presentations to community organizations. "We're not generating interest and support as much as trying to be good neighbors."

When asked if there was anything that would stop the airport, Henriksen replied simply, "No."



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