



St. Cloud airport study to pave way for its future

Nora G. Hertel, nhertel@stcloudtimes.com Published 3:30 p.m. CT July 29, 2017



4



The Snowbirds, Canada's military air show demonstration team, fuels at St. Cloud Regional Airport.



Buy Photo

(Photo: Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com)

CONNECT TWEET LINKEDIN 4 COMMENT EMAIL MORE

The future of the St. Cloud Regional Airport is cloudy, but a new study grant could help things take off.

The airport hosts regular commercial flights to Arizona and will add a route to Punta Gorda, Florida, in November. But local officials say it's not

sustainable to keep the burden of the airport's finances and its leadership solely with the city.

The Legislature provided \$250,000 to St. Cloud for a study that could answer questions posed by leaders in the tricounty area and possibly pave the way to change airport management over to a regional airport authority.

"I've always felt that the airport should be regional," said St. Cloud Mayor Dave Kleis. "It says 'Regional Airport' on the sign."

St. Cloud residents foot more than half of the airport's \$1 million annual budget through property taxes. A half-cent sales tax in the city goes to the airport's capital

TOP VIDEOS



News for Somali speakers: Autism awareness in the Somali community

6:54



Fire crew cuts apart car

1:21



News for Somali Speakers: Green Market is a new store in Waite Park.

3:07



Art Fair in the Gardens

1:02



Foster parents Janita and Kevin Dieger

1:09

improvements.

RELATED: [Former St. Cloud airport head Ryks to lead MAC](#)

People in the city pay about \$12 per capita for the airport, Kleis said. If that tax burden was spread over three counties, people would pay about \$2.50 a year.

Regional airport authorities can tax residents and they're run by a board with representatives from participating communities. Kleis has pitched it to Stearns, Sherburne and Benton counties before, but they weren't convinced.

The airport needs a market-based business plan that could work for the three counties involved, said Patti Gartland, president of the Greater St. Cloud Development Corp.

The development corporation lobbied for state funding for the study and will be involved in the research. It's because the airport is a driver for economic development.



The St. Cloud Regional Airport, shown on Thursday, July 27, has commercial flights and is home to corporate airplanes and other general aviation. (Photo: Nora G. Hertel, nhertel@stcloudtimes.com)

"In all aspects of economic development, transportation is at the base," Kleis said, "whether its roads, rail — going way back in the community, the river — or air."

For companies with a global presence, air travel is key to their success, Kleis said.

Half of the airplanes based at the airport are tied to business travel, said Bill Towle, airport director for the last 15 years.

Allegiant is the only commercial airline that runs through St. Cloud. Personal and corporate planes, privately chartered flights and helicopters use the airport as well.

In 2014 the airport brought in United Airlines for daily flights between Chicago and St.

Cloud, with \$1 million from a federal grant plus local contributions from businesses and the counties. Once the subsidy ran out, United bailed and told the city there weren't enough passengers to sustain the route.

A regional airport authority could have convinced United not to pull out, Kleis said.



Passengers bustle about the St. Cloud Regional Airport in this 2014 file photo. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com)

RELATED VIDEO: [St. Cloud Regional Airport begins flights to Chicago \(2014\)](#)

RELATED OPINION: [Our View: Move forward with regional air authority \(2015\)](#)

Airport authorities are beneficial, because all the jurisdictions have a voice in how the airport operates, Towle said. Plus, the more communities involved in the airport, the more clout with lawmakers in higher levels of government.

"We are the poster child for having an airport authority. We have lots of cities in the area. We have lots of counties," Towle said. "All of them intersect, basically, at the airport."

Leaders in the three counties around the airport know it serves the region beyond St. Cloud proper.

But Benton County Board Chairman Warren Peschl doesn't want to jump in without other counties in the region sharing the financial burden.

"We're kind of a property-poor county, so we have to watch our dollars," Peschl said.

Stearns County Board Chairman DeWayne Mareck didn't know about the upcoming study. But he said he's open to talks about a regional airport authority and what that would truly mean for Stearns County.

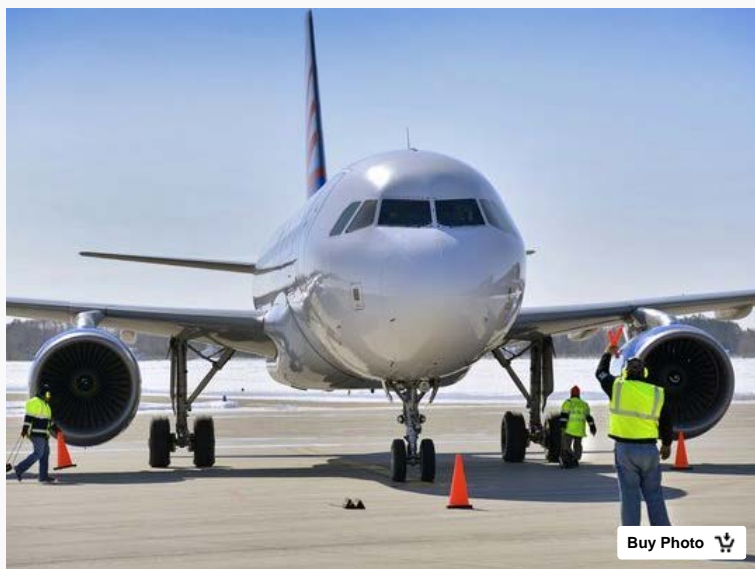
Sherburne County Board member Felix Schmiesing wants Sherburne County to be at the table and do more than donate to the airport.

"I do feel it's a regional entity," Schmiesing said. "From a tax-fairness point of view, we all benefit from it."

Kleis hopes the new airport study will answer all questions that the counties have so that they might get on board with forming a regional airport authority.

The search for an independent firm to study the airport and trends in the air industry will begin after local leaders get together and determine what exactly they want to know.

The study will be done by the end of the year, Kleis said.



A ground crew tends to parking and chocking a commercial flight in March 2014 at St. Cloud Regional Airport. (Photo: Kimm Anderson, kanderson@stcloudtimes.com)

Nora G. Hertel: nhertel@stcloudtimes.com or on Twitter [@nghertel](https://twitter.com/nghertel).

[f](#) CONNECT | [TWEET](#) | [in](#) 4 LINKEDIN | [COMMENT](#) | [EMAIL](#) | [MORE](#)