

# Front Range Airport officials await spaceport decision

by Kathy Smiley  
Staff Writer

WATKINS — Five years to the month since Front Range Airport officials first heard the word “spaceport,” the airport is closer than ever to licensing to become one.

Front Range Airport Advisory Board chairman Barry Gore, at the board’s Aug. 26 meeting, reflected on the origin of the idea that the airport could be suited to be a space facility. Gore was on the Front Range Airport Authority Board in August 2011 when the seed was planted, following conversations with a space vehicle development company.

“Rocket Crafters came and said, ‘you’d be a great place for a spaceport’ and [our] response was ‘what is that?’” Gore said. “In the last five years we’ve seen an explosion in commercial space with all these companies. It’s interesting to be at the birth of an industry, to be able

to say, ‘I saw the beginning of all this.’”

In the past five years grants were procured by the airport to help fund the licensure process, a spaceport consultant was hired and, by mid-year 2013, work on the licensure proceeded, beginning with an environmental assessment and followed by the application itself. Communication between the Federal Aviation Administration’s Commercial Space Division, the consultants and airport staff has been ongoing for the last three years. During that time, in late 2013, declining operations and cost overruns resulted in Adams County assuming management of the airport and the resignation of Aviation Director Dennis Heap. Current Airport Manager Dave Ruppel was hired by the county in November 2014.

Ruppel told the advisory board that, while the process has been long, a milestone has been reached:

All required documentation is now in the hands of the FAA.

“This hasn’t been an easy thing. It’s more complicated than any of us realized,” he said. “But it’s important to recognize what has happened. Every piece of documentation for the license has all been turned in. They’ve given us reviews; we’ve answered questions. ... What we hope was the final set of questions we received from the FAA on the environmental assessment were returned to them about a month ago.”

Ruppel noted that the FAA is having very “heated and intense” internal discussions about how to handle spaceports on current airports, and that once it works out those internal policies, he anticipates the licensure will be finalized.

Gore said that the past five years have been “a wild ride — a lot of



KATHY SMILEY/Eastern Colorado News

Colorado Department of Transportation Aeronautics Division Director Dave Ulane discusses the agency’s mission at the Front Range Airport Advisory Board meeting Aug. 26.

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enthusiasm and a lot of waiting. It’s painful. If you’re on the cutting edge, it’s also the bleeding edge. But it’s one we know is going to happen.”

Speaking to Ruppel, Gore added, “You’re doing the devil part, which is the details. In order for Colorado to keep its leading aerospace industry position in the country, we have to be pursuing this.”

## OTHER DISCUSSION

Gore reported on an interview he conducted with each of the advisory board members on their priorities for the airport, and hangar space was mentioned by all of them.

“It appears that there are waiting lists at every airport in the metro area for hangar space,” he said. “There is unanimous belief from the advisory board that construction of hangars is a high, high priority — whether that’s finding investors who want to build private hangars, or the county investing in the infrastructure, building hangars and leasing them.”

Ruppel responded that hangar development is under discussion with Adams County and hangar construction will be in the preliminary budget for next year.

“From a business perspective and a cost-benefit analysis, we feel certain that if we build a set of T-hangars, we’d have them leased out

probably before we break ground — making enough off of them to pay for the cost of the loan,” he said, adding that the loan could come from the county or CDOT.

Current maintenance projects include road improvement in conjunction with the county road and bridge department, which will begin within the next few weeks with repairs on the entry road, parking lots, an access road, and a taxi-lane.

Another ongoing project is the replacement of the roof on the fixed-base operations hangar.

Ruppel said airport operations significantly increased this summer, primarily because of training conducted by Doss Aviation, a company offering military flight exercises.

“They saw it as a great opportunity to bring their students up here to get a training round in a tower environment, but without the busyness of some of the other (regional) airports,” Ruppel said.

The Air Force Academy also held training operations at Front Range this summer, bringing three or four aircraft a day to train on the runways.

“Overall, we’ve seen about a 7 to 8 percent increase in operations year over year, consistently the last couple of years,” Ruppel added. “Hopefully we can sustain that kind of positive

growth.”

## CDOT AERONAUTICS UPDATE

Colorado Division of Aeronautics Director Dave Ulane gave an update on the agency, which has its office at Front Range Airport. Although part of the Colorado Department of Transportation, the division is unique, Ulane said.

“CDOT has 3,500 employees statewide,” he said. “We have eight.”

In its 25th year of operation, CDOT Aeronautics is tasked with taking all the aviation fuel tax revenue in Colorado and reinvesting it into the aviation system.

The division is accountable to both CDOT and the Colorado Aeronautical Board — a seven-member panel appointed by the governor.

“There are 74 public-use airports in Colorado; 14 of those have commercial service — Denver International is the biggest of those,” Ulane said, adding that 60 of the airports, like Front Range, are general aviation.

Fuel tax revenue comes from three sources: all jet fuel, including that which is sold to airlines, is subject to 2.9 percent in sales tax; non-commercial jet fuel users pay 4 cents a gallon and Avgas users pay 6 cents a gallon in excise tax. By state statute, about 65 percent of that revenue goes back to the airport where the fuel was sourced.

On average, airport dis-

bursements account for nearly 67 percent of the money expended from the Aviation Fund. The remaining funds, less the division’s administrative costs, are used for the Colorado Discretionary Aviation Grant Program.

Other CDOT Aeronautics projects include the mountain Automated Weather Observing System (AWOS) program. Colorado is the first state in the nation to own and operate its own weather observing stations. After the Colorado General Assembly acknowledged, during its 2000 session, the need for improved aviation weather reporting in the mountainous terrain along the Continental Divide, 12 AWOS stations were installed at critical mountain passes most vulnerable to weather-dependent aircraft accidents. Funding for the project was shared by the legislature and the Colorado Aviation Fund.

CDOT Aeronautics partners with several Colorado airports to provide airport management internship programs. Another program helps airports maintain pavement by loaning out crack-fill machines and paying for 90 percent of material up to \$10,000.

Another project — the Virtual Air Traffic Control Tower testing and assessment program — will solidify Colorado’s reputation as a pioneer in aviation, according to Ulane. The Divi-

sion of Aeronautics is partnering with FAA to develop the first federally designed and implemented remote air traffic control tower, which will be installed at the Fort Collins-Loveland Municipal Airport. The new virtual technology will use cameras as well as radar data.

The Colorado Aviation Fund will provide \$10 million in funding for the test phase of the project.

Ulane said brick-and-mortar air traffic control towers are costly to build and maintain, and FAA funding for towers has mostly dried up.

“This concept will allow for the installation of equipment at an airport that will provide a video and radar feed for a fraction of the cost of a traditional control tower, feed that information into a console at a remote location, and allow somebody sitting at a desk to provide air traffic control safety separation services without all the capital and operational expense of a traffic control tower,” he noted. “The best part is, you can turn it on and off and take it to a different airport. This, I think, will be the future of air traffic control.”

Equipment for the research project is expected to be installed in early spring 2017, with initial testing and assessments of the new virtual technology to start that summer, with a two-year development process.