



The Road to Riches and Why No One is Laughing Now The Story of the Van Zandt County Regional Airport

Years ago, if you stumbled upon the entrance to (what was then) the Wills Point Municipal Airport, you were greeted by a stop sign that dangled from a chain which stretched across two posts of an old barbed wire fence. If you were lucky, you might catch a glimpse of the discolored, cracked runway beyond a 78 acre pasture of overgrown Doveweed and Johnson-grass. Besides that, there was little evidence that you were even at an airport.

Today, the few folks who seemed to care about the airport's potential are no longer embarrassed. They are proud of recent accomplishments and — most importantly — optimistic about its future. Those newfound feelings made statewide news when the Van Zandt County Regional Airport was named the 2012 Most Improved General Aviation Airport at the 30th Annual Texas Aviation Convention in Galveston.

“Several years ago, the airport was dying and it was the subject of ridicule. People pointed to it as an example for other airports of what *not* to be like,” Weldon Massey, a local rancher and flying enthusiast, said. “We’ve come a long way since then, but more importantly we have a plan in place to make a lot more improvements. There is hope on the horizon.”

Back then, the airport was a drain on the city budget. There was no money for improvements and little desire to fix it.

“Because of its reputation, I visited the airport about 7 years ago,” Mike Reagan, who was the TxDOT Routine Airport Maintenance Program (RAMP) coordinator, says. “I discovered that their runway really had a pretty good foundation, so improvements would not be as costly as they figured. But the biggest positive was the fact that some people — like Massey and Paul Addison — wanted to make things better. And that really got the ball rolling.”

Addison, a local business owner and now a Wills Point City Councilman, was among the biggest proponents of airport improvements. “After Weldon Massey’s son gave me a plane ride, I was

hooked on aviation. I began to realize that if we could somehow turn this blight into a benefit, we could actually attract new business here.”

In late 2007, the city turned over the airport to the Wells Point Economic Development Corporation, which formed an airport advisory board. Massey and Addison were named vice president and president, respectively.

After receiving grant funding, a beautification project got underway and the runway was brought back to life. Striping was added and the dilapidated lighting system was replaced. The airports old rotating beacon was repaired and restored. The entrance now consists of an electronic gate and keypad. The old, grown up fence row was improved and the barbed wire was replaced with pipe and rail. Lighted masonry signs were added and wildflowers were seeded along FM 64. A parking lot was built last summer and a courtesy car for incoming pilots was donated by the City of Wills Point.

Instead of a liability, the Van Zandt Regional Airport is quickly becoming an asset.

And it’s about to get even better. The airport has received a grant for an aviation fuel storage tank. The ability to sell gas to pilots is a boon to airports.

Also, plans are in the works for a terminal building, new boundary fencing and hangar construction.

“As we’ve made these improvements, we have been reaching out to the community,” Pam Pearson, who is the administrator of the Wills Point Economic Development Corporation and serves as the airport manager, says. “Slowly, residents are coming around, knowing that an airport is good news for our economy.” In October, residents will be invited to the first annual Van Zandt County Regional Airport Open House.

By then, there could be hundreds of new Van Zandt County residents since a business has recently announced the start of operations there.

If they are able to attend the open house, they will never know that the airport was once guarded by an old faded stop sign that dangled from a chain.