



AOPA AIRPORT SUPPORT  
NETWORK



# PUBLIC RELATIONS

THE KEY TO YOUR AIRPORT'S SUCCESS



The public perception of an airport is critical to its survival and long-term health. Often, the nonflying public has a hard time recognizing that the airport is a vital, vibrant and valuable asset to the community. Many airport-related problems arise from this lack of understanding by the community and its leaders. Opponents often argue that an airport creates noise, environmental challenges, is just for hobbyists and is a drain on the community. However, your airport group can carefully educate the public on the value of the airport and general aviation to the local community. To help you in this process, AOPA created this guide to focus on three aspects of airport public relations: community outreach, political action, and media relations.

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Start your efforts to build public support by conducting an informational program for local civic organizations. This is critically important because organizations like Kiwanis, Rotary, Chamber of Commerce, are where you find the opinion leaders in a community. These are the people who shape the local policy decisions and are almost always involved in these organizations.

When preparing for your presentation, it is important to research and present all the positive impacts the airport provides the community. Facts to present may include details of the significant role the airport plays in law enforcement, disaster relief, agricultural operations, and business attraction. All of these individual components can be clearly presented with as much economic impact information that can be gathered. See AOPA's economic impact guide.

It is also important to recognize that not everyone may support the airport. However, there are steps that can be taken to improve the airport's public image.

- 1. Clean it up.** Take a fresh look at what the neighbors see. If it is junk and weeds, the neighbors may not think the airport is a safe environment, professional, and business-oriented.
- 2. Change something.** If noise concerns are prevalent at your airport, small changes to operational procedures can lead to large improvements in public perception.
- 3. Invite your neighbors over.** Airport events are among the best ways to promote aviation in the community. Events such as airport anniversary celebrations, an open house, aircraft displays, fly-ins, or antique shows, all can be hugely successful events in drawing the community to the airport so that they recognize its value. Also, most events can be launched with minimal financial expenditure by partnering with local nonprofits and businesses.

## POLITICAL ACTION

Airports are usually owned and operated by a county or city government. Local officials such as mayors, city councils members, and county commissioners are key players in protecting, managing, and funding a community airport.

It is important to know who these people are and develop relationships that will have a positive effect on the future of the airport.

A successful political action effort requires dedication by your group to keep abreast of local political developments and ensuring political support for the airport. Also the group should seek opportunities to serve on airport advisory groups, airport commissions, or other local bodies like planning commissions to help protect the airport. Success in obtaining these seats will give you both a direct line to important decision makers and a role in making those decisions.

Focus on developing relationships, educating decision makers, and participating in public meetings. Consider supporting pro-airport candidates or even running for office yourself.



Whether you are meeting in person, attending a public hearing, engaging a political campaign, or writing political leaders, there are some general tips to keep in mind to most effectively promote your airport.

- Be polite. Always address a committee or hearing in a reasonable manner.
- Be prepared. Provide a copy of your position statement for each person who may be interested.
- Make sure you know your opposition's position, and be ready to rebut if necessary.
- Prior to speaking, state your name, the group you represent, and that you are a voter (if you live in the jurisdiction). Then briefly explain why you are in support or opposition.

## **MEDIA RELATIONS**

While many pilots have little experience in engaging the media, a sound relationship between your group and local news outlet will be a great asset when additional group publicity is needed. Key components of your media relations plan should include developing and maintaining a relationship with local media outlets, distributing press releases, submitting letters to the editor, and providing press advisories.

The easiest way to reach local news reporters is simply by contacting local outlet newsrooms and identifying the transportation reporter. By establishing this contact, you become a source on aviation matters or are in a position to refer the reporter to a more knowledgeable source. It is important to remember that the degree of coverage received depends largely on how well prepared you are to assist the reporter in gathering newsworthy and accurate facts. Remember; know the facts and stick to them - avoid speculation at all costs!

Preparing other documents such as news releases, letters to the editor, and press advisories can also assist your cause. Keep in mind when drafting such items that each must contain contact information for the group, be concise, to the point, and above all, contain genuine news. When drafting any document intended for distribution to the press, always try to provide the "five W's". By explaining the "who, what, when, where, and why" of the topic, your press release should contain information that is of interest to the local media outlet.

Press releases will seldom answer all the questions the reporter or the public may have. Therefore, the name listed on the contact line of the release must be easily reachable and ready to speak on the subject.