



Aerodromes Under Threat

Does your favourite aerodrome have a secure future?

“IT’S A nice day, let’s get the plane out and go for a fly. We could visit NZXX and stretch our legs taking in the scenery as we walk to the local café.”

That’s all very well but there does have to be an airfield to fly into. Even helicopters need airfields to avoid the complaints from those who see a threat in every off-field landing. Many of us take the ongoing existence of our favourite airfields somewhat for granted. But some airfields are coming under real pressure and their existence into the future is not a sure thing at all.

For better or worse, the days are long gone when local Councils were expected to provide even basic services such as water supply or rubbish collection out of rates. Many airfields are owned and maintained by Councils who in most cases these days are now required to separately cost each of their facilities in terms of profit and loss. And in most cases there will be at least a couple of Councillors who think the local aerodrome is a financial burden that could better be utilised as playing fields or community housing, etc. The cry can easily be, “Why should the ratepayer subsidise rich pilots when the under-privileged kids have to pay to use the swimming pool?”, or some other local subsidy has just been withdrawn.

Of course airfields bring in pilots who spend money, generating economic activity for the district but Politicians will tend to sway to where they think votes will come from and the small local aero club and visiting pilots who sometimes pay the landing fee might find themselves outnumbered. We can’t rely on land designations or covenants protecting the existence of airfields either. Even Ardmore, when sold to private concerns by the Government some years ago, wasn’t given protection from future closure and redevelopment by the purchasers – which seems extraordinary given the circumstance and value of the sale.

As an example, take Raglan Aerodrome, much loved by many pilots as a great lunch destination on a nice day, or indeed a bolt hole on the west coast in times of deteriorating weather. Just last year a debate was held about its Council subsidy of approximately \$15,000 a year. (Council accounts show \$23,000 of expenditure versus \$8,000 of landing fees collected.) At the time the Council decided to increase the landing fee 10% to \$5.50. Clearly that’s a Council that currently supports aviation but in no time at all

there were internet forum comments comparing that subsidy to recently de-subsidised bus services to the town, suggesting that “Sunday bus services brought more business to Raglan, as well as providing a local service and a lot less noise”. Following further Council deliberations this year the landing fee has increased to \$10, which given the location of the field seems very reasonable. Landing fees do vary widely around the country. For comparison, it costs only \$1.50 to land a Microlight at Taupo! but at Mount Cook the cost is \$46.

Raglan landing fees are these days collected by the Aimm (previously Greasr) automated landing fee management system, but not that long ago were by an honesty payment to the next door camping ground office. On at least half the occasions this writer landed there, the person in the office expressed surprise that I was paying, as apparently many who

used the field did not. Aimm will have fixed that problem by now and there’s every chance that combined with the higher landing fee, Council accounts will show a nil cost for airfield operations next year. Raglan is safe for now, until perhaps someone declares the land to be under-utilised and capable of generating more revenue via another purpose. That could easily happen with a change of Council (it could already be happening at many other airfields) and unless you’re on the ball, you wouldn’t get to find out about it until it was too late. With that in mind, we have reprinted a very good essay from Robin Britton that was published in Soaring NZ earlier this year. See ‘Securing Your Future – The Importance of District Plans’ later in this article.

It’s not just the Council owned airfields that can be under pressure. Many of the private and aero club owned fields around the country are facing significant rates increases, having frequently been rated on unimproved value and now finding themselves rated under capital value instead. Harvey Lockie, of West Auckland Airport Parakai says that their rates have jumped from \$5,000 per annum to \$12,000 and he cites another example of rates rising from \$16,000 to \$61,000. Consenting and compliance requirements are also getting tougher and more expensive as time goes by.

Given the primary way to recover costs at most of our airfields is through landing fees (providing they are reasonable and pilots don’t avoid paying them), we asked Harvey Lockie how widely the Aimm

system (developed by Harvey and other members of the Lockie family) is being adopted and what feedback they have been getting.

Aimm is now set up to offer Councils or other aerodrome owners a complete service for landing fee management – as well as collating all movements at member airfields onto one invoice for pilots. Aimm staff can undertake all of the call playback and data entry functions as well as chasing up non-payers. Harvey says that all the airfield operator has to do is provide a home and connections for the computer and radio, and advise of the rates they wish to charge. (The system can be configured for landing or day rates.) Aimm now has more than 1500 NZ aircraft owners signed up and more aerodromes going live every month. They have also recently expanded into Australia.

Statistics comparing revenue at some airfields pre and post Aimm implementation suggest that they are collecting 95% of landing fees against only 15% for a previously well placed honesty box. Harvey says it’s surprising how many people have said “But it’s free to land at NZXX – I’ve been going there for years and never got a bill.” He also notes that fees of \$10 are more likely to be paid than those of just \$5, “Perhaps people can hardly be bothered for the very small amounts,” he says, adding that “The biggest factor in getting paid is having an ‘admin fee’ on the invoice that will be charged if payment is not received in a timely manner.

So if your favourite aerodrome starts charging the price of a coffee and muffin to land there, pay the fee with gratitude. As Harvey says “Every airfield seems to have at least one local resident who is obsessed with the noise and fears that it might stop the hens laying eggs or contaminate their organic veges with the lead from plane exhausts. Political correctness now requires all the nutters in the world to be taken seriously, and it is dangerous to give them a provable financial reason to push for aerodrome closure.”

Luckily, changes to Council rules and regulations or the use of public land usually need to be publically notified. Robin Britton contributed the following essay to Soaring NZ magazine (which is published by Jill McCaw who also contributes to KiwiFlyer). With Robin’s permission, we thought it was well worth reprinting here for KiwiFlyer readers. Thanks Robin.

Do take heed of her advice.

Securing Your Future: The Importance of District Plans

Contributed by Robin Britton

ALL District or City Councils have a District Plan. District Plans are prepared under the Resource Management Act, and the focus of this legislation is to control land use activities, irrespective of who owns the land. This includes for examples rules about airfields but also rules about the rural (and residential) land that surrounds airfields. The presumption in the RM Act is that you can do anything on your land, unless the District Plan says otherwise – in which case you are likely to need to get a resource consent from the Council.

Many of these plans are now being reviewed. Please go and check what is happening in your District! District Plans can place constraints on how you operate - but they can also provide protection to your operation (reverse sensitivity).

Things you need to keep an eye out for include for example:

- Changes in noise controls (that may curtail when you operate, or how loud your plane can be; or may require sound proofing).
- Changes in hours of operations.
- Changes in height restrictions of buildings and trees particularly if they are in flight paths.
- Is your take-off and landing flight paths protected from other activities?
- Changes relating to reverse sensitivity – are your current operations protected?
- Changes in rural subdivision in proximity to the airfield.
- Changes in access and roadway requirements.
- Changes in building controls on the airfield.

How to approach a plan:

- Start by looking at the maps and find out what zoning and policy overlays apply.
 - Check out the rules that apply to this zone.
 - Check out the information that goes with the rules eg. standards, procedures etc.
 - Now look at the same information for all land that is in the general area of your airfield.
 - And don’t forget about other areas where you fly regularly. Watch out for developments that may affect your flying paths – pylons, power lines or buildings near strips, etc.
- Don’t think too narrowly about geography or about possible restrictions. If there are key areas to be protected for safe flying in the future then identify them and make sure they are protected in the District Plan.

So how does a plan review process happen?

Some councils will review the whole of their current (called operative) District Plan in one effort – others will do a rolling review and pick on sections over time. Either way, there will be a draft document and consultation with the public before any changes are formally ‘proposed’ and ‘publicly notified’. At this stage you can write a submission, or a further submission (if you oppose or support something someone else has said). This is summarised by staff and a Council Hearing follows. Decisions are released and if you don’t ‘support’ any of the decision, you can appeal them to the Environment Court - where a ‘de novo’ hearing takes place. This whole process is not quick, so someone in your Club should be keeping an on-going eye on these issues!

I can’t reiterate this strongly enough - if you don’t know what is in the District Plan that applies to your airfield – please go and find out NOW. Keep an eye on the District Plan Review process and if in doubt, go and talk to one of the Council Planners, ask them to take you through what they are doing and when the review is going to happen. Also ask to go onto their mailing list so they will inform you when changes are being drafted.

And while I am having my rant – please also keep an eye out for:

- The Annual Plan that Councils put out – this is in general about work programmes, budgets and fees. If your field is operated by a Council they will expect you to look at this document for any changes being proposed in their planning horizon.
- The Reserve Management Plan, which may exist if the land has a reserve status, and can control activities within the reserve, alongside the District Plan.

By staying on top of these matters, you can protect your Club’s future right to operate, and the future use of your favourite airfield for generations to come.

