

# Berkeley Airport is Taking Off

Robert J. Miller Airpark in Berkeley is trying to get on the radar for more local pilots.

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Air travelers may never be able to board a scheduled flight to Orlando, Fla., from Robert J. Miller Airpark, located in Berkeley out on the edge of the Pine Barrens. But for the past few years, Ocean County's own airport has been evolving into a regional transportation hub with a serious flight school.

"When we came here in '98, it started to grow," said Timothy Boyd, who with his brother, Leonard, owns Ocean Aire, the company that operates Miller, which is known by the International Air Transport Association code MJX. "It's obvious now that this is going to be a big airport and we're going to be here for it."

With the county home to more than 550,000 permanent residents today, more sophisticated air traffic has been flying into and out of Miller. The coming and going of corporate jets are ordinary occurrences here.

Ocean County Administrator Alan W. Avery said the Board of Freeholders expect to break ground this year on a new terminal building, two stories in height. The 11,600-square-foot complex is designed to include a restaurant or cafeteria as part of a larger observation lounge that will be open to the general public.

But before anyone concludes that budget-strapped Ocean County is spending money willy-nilly out here, Avery said it should be clear that FAA Airport Improvement Projects, funded by federal and state grants, require the county to match just 5 percent of the costs



Some airplanes are parked outside at Robert J. Miller Airpark in Berkeley. (STAFF PHOTO: BOB BIELK)



Timothy Boyd, co-owner of Ocean Aire, the airport's manager, stands in front of a World War II B-25 bomber being serviced at the Berkeley airport. (STAFF PHOTO: BOB BIELK)



Kal Dunne, a mechanic for Ocean Aire, works on a plane in the maintenance hangar at Robert J. Miller Airpark in Berkeley. (STAFF PHOTO: BOB BIELK)

Construction of a second runway is also planned at the 420-acre airport. The proposed \$5 million, 3,000-foot paved landing strip, called a crosswind runway, would make Miller safer for pilots to take off from and set down upon when the wind is gusting from a perpendicular direction. Boyd said the county expects to have cut through all the environmental regulatory red tape sometime in the next six months.

Meanwhile, the existing 6,000-foot Runway 6-24 is long enough to land a Boeing 747 in an emergency pinch, Boyd boasted.

"But I don't expect any 747s," he quipped. "I expect airplanes like this and smaller to come here and utilize it," he explained, gesturing to a Gulfstream jet on the tarmac.

### **Millions in upgrades**

Miller was constructed as a private airfield in 1967. The county purchased it about a year later. In addition to state funds for various safety improvements, more than \$8.7 million in federal funds has been allocated for upgrades at Miller since 1982.

An estimated 32,000 flights a year arrive and depart from the airport. The county government's own projections show flight operations eventually increasing to about 50,000, but this will primarily depend on future economic conditions, Avery said.

Without Miller, which geographically is about smack dab in the middle of Ocean County, about 155 pilots would be forced to relocate. Safety on the ground would also be jeopardized, because air ambulance services, the state Forest Fire Service and Civil Air Patrol fly out of Miller. The only other public airfield in the county is Lakewood Airport, which has a 3,000-foot runway.

The airpark has also become popular with a number of local VIPs who are not only wealthy enough to afford a vacation home at the Shore, but have the means to jet in and out of the county at their pleasure. To protect their privacy and security, Boyd is mum on naming names.

"They're movers and shakers in the area," Boyd said. "We don't do any charter out of here. In other words, you can't hire an airplane to go out of here. We just don't have a charter company here."

At least not yet.

"They could come in, in a heartbeat," he said.

Pilot James Candeletti, 48, of Lacey, keeps his single-engine 1979 Grumman Tiger based at MJX, where he has been an outspoken advocate for a crosswind runway and a critic of the state Pinelands Commission for holding up the project. Candeletti also sits on the Ocean County Aviation Advisory Committee.

"I think it will improve (Miller) tremendously, both on a pilot's end and a passenger's end," Candeletti said. "We still have a couple hurdles to get through, but it looks like it will happen."

He said while the new runway will increase air traffic at Miller on windy days, he does not foresee the arrival of a charter service. While there is certainly no reason one cannot set up shop, there are those special interest groups who would do battle over any change in the modest role Miller now plays.

### **Watching the planes**

Having said that, the airport is popular with aviation enthusiasts who can be seen at Miller, usually in their cars in the parking lot overlooking the tarmac, watching the planes come and go through the fence line, on any given nice day.

In 2009, the Ocean County Board of Freeholders budgeted \$117,392 for two full-time employees and one part-time seasonal employee. The county personnel include armed sheriff's officers responsible for security in this post-9/11 world and groundskeepers to do work such as mowing the grass. The county also maintains an off-the-leash dog park at the airport and the grounds are home to the annual Ocean County Fair each July.

Another \$25,000 went to operating expenses in 2009. Ocean Aire operates the airport with its own staff under a contract with the county.

Ocean Aire was selected as the "fixed-based operator" for Miller through a public competitive process, Avery said.

"In essence he leases the county's facilities at the airpark," Avery said. "In return he also must provide certain services like fueling, maintenance of aircraft, tie-down rentals, et cetera. The county receives payment for ground lease and a percentage based on fuel sales and maintenance that occurs at the airpark. We do not pay the FBO."

The county does however collect rent money directly from aircraft owners for the use of space in the county-owned hangars on site, he said.

The Boyds have been involved in the airport business since they were children. Their father was an airplane mechanic in the Navy during World War II. After he was discharged, he went to work for Ed Brown, who built what is today Monmouth Executive Airport in Wall.

"That's all he knew and he was good at it, so my brother came along and started sweeping the floor and cleaning up the grease, and then he became a mechanic, and then he became a good mechanic," Timothy Boyd said.

"It was our father's business," said Leonard Boyd, the quieter of a pair who are from introduction distinctly reserved and soft-spoken in manner.

"I had other interests and reached a point in my life when I needed a different job, so my brother and I went into business," said Timothy Boyd.

Ocean Aire left Monmouth Executive Airport, formerly called Allaire Airport, over a decade ago over differences with Brown, who died in 2006.

"When we came down here, we had no promise of a new terminal, we had no promise of a crosswinds runway. . . . We really had no promises at all," Timothy Boyd said. "But we've grown it into a viable airport. It has taken a lot of hard work."

Today, about 27 people are employed by Ocean Aire and aircraft from all over the mid-Atlantic region come into Miller for repairs and general maintenance work by Ocean Aire's staff of mechanics, including vintage warplanes from the American Air Power Museum in Farmingdale, N.Y.

"My brother is the director of maintenance over there," Timothy Boyd quipped with a grin. "(But) actually, yes, we're one of the few places (in the region) that can do it."

### **Flight students**

He said there are about 40 people in their flight school, in different stages and on different aircraft.

Learning to fly is not cheap. The tuition from start to finish for a basic private pilot license is \$6,000. Anyone 16 or older can go to Ocean Aire's flight school to become a licensed pilot on a single-engine aircraft. For another \$10,000 and more, those new pilots can get the foundation to learn how to become a commercial airline pilot.

"We have an instrument-landing system here. (Monmouth Executive) doesn't have that," Timothy Boyd said. "You can come in here on an ILS (instrument landing system) flight plan and land at this field when you can't see."

Boyd said despite coming into its own over the past decade, Miller still remains off the radar, so to speak, for many in the public.

"(But pilots) are going to base here. (People are) going to fly out of here, but we'll be a little, closely held secret of the area and we'll be a nice airport," Boyd said.