

Connecting Southern Oregon to the World



Photo by David Gibb | dgibbphoto.com

Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport has been a regional landmark at its current location off Biddle Road since the 1930s, but over the past decade the operation has taken off. After considerable behind-the-scenes effort, a gleaming \$35 million, 110,000-square-foot terminal was opened in 2009. Around the same time, a \$3.6 million control tower was erected, bringing the airport into the 21st century.

In the past three years, the airport has broken passenger records without showing any signs of slowing down. In 2016, 822,289 travelers passed through the gates, an almost 100,000 increase over 2015. In 1994, the passenger count was 307,621. With more and more airlines signing up to fly in and out of Medford, the airport's economic impact to the region is estimated at a whopping \$250 million annually. Residents from nine counties in the region fly out of Medford.

With about 40 employees under Case, there are another 1,300 people who have badges to work at the airport because of the vast number of private operations as well as government agencies working there, including immigration, the National Weather Service and the Federal Aviation Administration.

One of the top three money makers for the airport is parking. Spectacular growth has led to the 1,000 available spaces often being filled, particularly over the holiday season, directing cars to an overflow, gravel lot. By year's end, another 500 parking spaces are planned to be built. Long-term plans under discussion will add an extra runway, which will make the airport even more convenient for travelers.

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"I'll say, 'My airport,' and I'll have somebody come back and go, 'Bern, it's not yours, it's the county's.' I think taking ownership and loving it as your own is a big deal."

— Bern Case,
Director of Rogue Valley
International-Medford Airport.

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After a long journey from faraway lands, weary travelers marvel at how easy it is to get in and out of the Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport. The spacious terminal and robust Wi-Fi come as a welcome surprise for weary visitors and locals who have fought crowds, long lines and spotty internet connections at the nation's biggest airports. The convenience, cleanliness and that magical, almost weightless feeling when you finally arrive back in Medford are the result of many years of planning and millions of dollars poured into making the airport one of the best in Oregon.

Behind that effort is Bern Case, the airport's director, who has transformed what was once an aging facility into one of the jewels of the Rogue Valley, turning it into a huge welcome sign for visitors and an economic engine for the region. Case smiles when people bring up his pivotal role and his deep dedication to all things aviation. "I'll say, 'My airport,' and I'll have somebody come back and go, 'Bern, it's not yours, it's the county's.' I think taking ownership and loving it as your own is a big deal."

When he started in 1994, the airport was showing its age after being around since the 1930s at its current location off Biddle Road. Case saw an opportunity to create a modern facility and began a long effort to secure the funding to back up his vision.

After considerable behind-the-scenes effort, a gleaming \$35 million, 110,000-square-foot terminal was opened in 2009. Around the same time, a \$3.6 million control tower was erected, bringing the airport into the 21st century and creating an instant landmark for those driving down Biddle Road. The vision Case had 20 years ago has paid off. In the past three years, the airport has broken passenger records without showing any signs of slowing down. "Airports are real interesting because if they're not business oriented, they're just a great big slab of concrete," Case said. "We're an enterprise fund of the county, which means we don't get any local tax dollars, so we need to be self-sufficient." Case said the airport has taken that philosophy to new heights by constantly innovating and keeping ahead of the curve, and the numbers speak for themselves. In 2016, 822,289 travelers passed through the gates, an almost 100,000 increase over 2015, another record year. When Case started in 1994, the passenger count was 307,621. With more and more airlines signing up to fly in and out of Medford, the airport's economic impact to the region is estimated at a whopping \$250 million. Residents from nine counties fly out of Medford.

Over more than 20 years, the airport has developed a strong management team that has worked together to continually ratchet up the services offered at the international airport. Airport spokesperson Kim Stearns said, "A lot of people in our positions are looking to move up to other larger airports, to kind of climb that corporate ladder, and that hasn't been the case with our administrative team. That creates its own synergy and provides a safe place to brainstorm ideas that we can push forward and find success." With about 40 employees under Case, there are about 1,300 people who have badges to work at the airport because of the vast number of private operations as well as government operations, including Immigration, the National Weather Service and the Federal Aviation Administration.

One of the top three money makers for the airport is parking, and spectacular growth has led to the 1,000 spaces often being filled, particularly over the holiday season, directing cars to an overflow, gravel lot. Case is ready to deal with this situation by adding another 500 parking spaces in 2017. Staring deeper into his crystal ball, Case is laying the groundwork to add another runway in the future. "Right now, if we have snow removal, we're closed because we only have one runway," he said. In addition, an extra runway would come in handy during emergency landings. The Federal Aviation Administration has conducted preliminary reviews of another runway, but it will likely be many years before federal funding is secured.

Because the airport operates as an enterprise fund under Jackson County, it must seek its own funding sources. "If we don't generate money, we've got to cut programs," Case said. "We haven't had to do that but some airports have." Apart from practical ideas for the future, the airport offers some attractions that travelers may not be aware of, such as a replica of the White House Oval Office. "It was probably one of our crazier ideas, but it was a junk room before," Case said. As with most ideas Case has developed, the county agreed with him that he could go ahead and build the Oval Office replica that makes use of what was a relatively unused space. He lined up donations and over 20 sponsors to help build it. More than just a tourist attraction, the Oval Office has been transformed into a public venue and community meeting room that can be an ice breaker for any gathering. The room, which would have an otherwise forgotten space, can be rented, helping generate more income for the airport.

Staying ahead of the curve has been a trademark at Rogue Valley International Medford Airport for years. Solar panels dot the parking areas, and the airport maintains its status as an international airport ready to handle overseas cargo, if necessary. Most airports contract out for advertising, but Stearns said her team decided to do it in-house. When Stearns talks to other airports, she said her team's out-of-the-box ideas get a lot of attention. "When they hear our ideas, they kind of cock their heads, like, 'We've never thought of that,'" she said.



Photo by David Gibb | dgibbphoto.com

Aerial View of Rogue Valley International Airport

THE SOUTHERN OREGON
EDGE

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