Airport Expansion, 1929

How a hard-fought municipal bond election made Boise a regional center of commercial aviation

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On April 7, 1928, Capitan R.G. Breene shocked Boiseans during a public ceremony at the Municipal Airport by saying that he would be “damned glad” to get off the field. He went on to tell a Statesman reporter that no one would come to the Boise field on his recommendation. He made it clear to all that were present that the city could never expect to have a terminal with such short runways, and obstacles such as telephone wires blocking the flight path. Finally, after two more trips down the short runway he and his passenger, the National President of the American Legion, lifted off. The citizen’s left on the field struggled to understand how their two-year old, Class AA airport could have become inferior already. What to do about the Boise Municipal Airport became an important topic to the city planners and citizens over the next year and a half.¹

If the citizens were shocked, the problems were less surprising to the city planners who had already received comments similar to Breene’s. Since 1927, other pilots talked of the dangers of landing and taking off at Boise. It became such a concern, that little more than a year after the airport’s dedication the City Council assigned a special engineers committee to start working on a proposal to make the field adequate for future aviation. The planners wanted to look at two possibilities: that of improving the current airport as well as the costs of relocating the airport.²

In September of 1927, Charles Lindberg flew into Boise. During his stay, he also mentioned some of the problems with the airport, advising the city to cut down all the trees that surrounded the site. Two weeks later, Virgil Adair, a local pilot, attempted to take-off in a strong gust of wind. The wind slowed down the plane, and the short runway forced the pilot to climb too steeply as he tried to clear the telephone wires at the end of the field. He lost speed and hit two of the old cottonwoods that Lindberg had been talking about. He and his two passengers were unhurt, but the city immediately had all the trees removed.³ However, the larger problems with the airport couldn’t be solved as easily as that. Planes had changed since the design of the original airport, and they needed longer runways for take off. The downtown, riverside location of the old municipal airport (where Boise State University is today) made obstacles like telephone wires hard to work around. It also left little room for expansion. The city waited to hear from the committee before deciding how to proceed with the improvement project.⁴

But after the harsh and public words of Breene in 1928, it became apparent that improvements needed to be expedited.⁵ Breene’s promise to discourage others from flying into Boise disturbed some of its businessmen, and they immediately sprang into action. Over the next month, letters poured into the City Council, asking for improvements. Citizens from the Boise Flying Club, the Boise Chamber of Commerce, J.F. Brumis from the City Neighborhood Club, and The Exchange Club all weighed in, and the council responded by taking on some
small improvements such as authorizing the removal of all wires at the east end of the airport, as well as lighting the current runways.

In 1929 the Boise Capital News editorialized for a municipal bond to build an adequate airport.
Then, on September 18, 1928 the engineering committee presented a multi-purpose plan for the airports improvement.\(^5\) The committee determined that it would cost too much to build a new airport, especially considering the Bench location they had explored had no roads leading to it. So instead, they suggested a plan for improving the current airport. The plan not only extended the runways, but also improved the Boise River between the Broadway and Ninth Street bridges. The committee proposed straightening the river between the two bridges giving it a fixed channel, then strengthening the banks as well as dredging 103,000 cubic yards of material from the river to be placed on the airport land. The engineers figured that enough waste material could be dredged from the river for filling in a cross runway for the landing field.\(^7\) This plan provided the additional benefit of adding protection against floods to both the Airport and Julia Davis Park. The recommendations were accepted and the City Council finally paved the way for a bond election in April of 1929. They asked for a bond of $85,000 to improve the airport.\(^8\)

This started a great debate between the citizens of Boise. This debate took place in businesses, on the streets, over the radio waves and very prominently in two of the major newspapers of that day. For a month, both *The Idaho Daily Statesman* and the *Boise Capital News* ran articles and editorials debating the merits and shortcomings of the bond issue. *The Statesman* openly stated its opposition to the bond while the *Capital News* ran editorials that very much supported its passage.\(^9\) The papers also recorded others who came out in support of the bond. Veterans showed support, when the American Legion urged Boiseans to read the “writing on the wall” and see how important air transportation could be to the citizens of Boise. This same veterans group had taken on the primary role in 1926 for getting the original airport developed in Boise, and had always been pro aviation. The Chamber of Commerce also ran ads showing support as did Falk’s ID, a Boise department store.\(^10\)

In opposition to the bond, *The Statesman* asked why the taxpayers should spend $85,000 on the airport. They especially questioned why the city plan extended the runway from 2,400 ft to 4,800 ft while Breene had said that the runways only needed to be extended 500 ft. The *Capital News* immediately fired a response, pointing out that the engineers planned to meet both the National Aviation Board requirements for a safety zone and the Department of Commerce’s requirement for runways. The 4,800 feet length came from their specifications. The importance of the latter agency came into play since they regulated the flights of The Varney Air Mail Service, which had been operating out of Boise since 1926. Varney Air Mail’s operation had originally brought a municipal airport to Boise, and being the largest aviation user in the City, their interests were of importance.\(^11\)

The debate over the runway length went on, as ads and editorials were printed displaying letters from pilots and engineers attesting to the unsafe conditions at the airport, as well as those from aircraft manufacturers declaring the runway
adequate. The Statesman also brought into question, whether the airport would ever again receive an A1 rating. Even with the improvements, there were other regulations by the Department of Commerce that would be hard to meet. One required the airport to be placed in a location that would facilitate expansion. Obviously, with its downtown location, the Boise Airport really had nowhere to expand. And as The Statesman pointed out, why pour money into an airport that will “never be adequate.”

But the pro-aviation side answered that question in a half page ad by the Boise Chamber of Commerce. In it, they stated that the city needed the airport improvements to insure its place on the transcontinental airline route. With both Varney Air Mail and Mamer Flying Service, announcing plans to begin passenger service through Boise by 1929, the issue of airport improvement took on new importance. Aviation turned into a potential source of income for the city, not just an interesting pastime for a few air minded citizens. Both Varney and Mamer hoped to establish a direct link between the larger cities in the Northwest and Salt Lake. Since Salt Lake already had flights to the East Coast, the Northwest link would establish a new transcontinental route from one coast to the other. An ad ran by the Chamber of Commerce, reproduced a telegraph message from W.E. Kline, The Department of Commerce’s Airways Engineer. In it, he stated that the current runways would not be suitable for large passenger ships of twelve to twenty people. The paper and pro-aviation citizens linked commerce to the development of longer and better runways, and this argument answered the question of why spend money on the airport.

Boise wasn’t the only airport looking at the possibility of becoming a part of the transcontinental link. The Caldwell airport development project was well under way. In an article in The Statesman, James Smith of the Caldwell Chamber of Commerce told of two new runways that would each be more than 4,300 ft. in length. He went on to point out that Caldwell’s location also placed it midway between coastal points and Salt Lake City, and that this positioned them to rapidly become the air center of the inland empire. Local air enthusiasts, as well as Boise businessmen, were already keenly aware of the existence of competition and how it could affect their city. Missing out on opportunities remained a sore subject for some businessmen of Boise. Forty years earlier, businessmen thought that the railroad would naturally come through Boise, and they did little to secure that outcome. As it turned out, the railroad ended up going out by Caldwell and Nampa instead. The terrain to Boise made the laying of tracks more costly, and in 1883 the city didn’t have the population to make the additional costs pay for themselves. Union Pacific’s publicist, Mr. Strahorn, had worked on developing Caldwell as a community, and angry Boiseans blamed him for the decision that excluded their city from the mainline. This anger overflowed as they hung him in effigy in 1883. But their anger changed nothing, and the Boise line ended up being a spur. It wasn’t until 1925 that the mainline came to Boise. This had been accomplished through the hard work of a committee of community leaders and businessmen, headed by W.E. Pierce, who raised a half
million dollars to buy the citizens right of way. Those rallying behind the airport bond reminded the citizens that they didn’t want to be left out again. The *Capital News* went as far as to remind the citizens, in an editorial, that they did not want to “take the chance of crippling their city in aviation transportation as this city was once crippled in railroad transportation.”

*The Idaho Statesman* made the cost of the airport improvement a central issue in the debate. It accused the “air … minded clique” of flying into a rage “if the timid taxpayer asked ‘What am I going to get out of it?’” On the other hand, the Chamber clearly felt the importance of being on the ground floor of commercial aviation as it printed in bold letters “Can We Afford to Sacrifice Our Place on the Transcontinental Air Line for the SMALL SUM It Will Cost Each Taxpayer?” To try and answer the many questions about the cost of the improvements, the City Council decided to call for bids on the contract before the bond election. The Council did this to allow the voters a chance to see the costs before they went to the polls. The next day, the *Capital News* applauded the decision in an editorial saying that it would assure the people of the lowest and best price, and that the work would be done under contract.

The calling for a bid tied into a major political issue of the time. Clearly from editorials in both papers, the issue of the unwise use of taxpayer’s money concerned the people of Boise. During this same period of time, the papers were filled with articles about the mayoral race, being decided during the same election as the bond issue. The *Capital News*, in a sharp editorial, expressed its hope that the electorate would “put their stamp of disapproval on the indiscriminate issuance of warrants and slipshod expenditures of public funds”. The editorial went on to state that James P. Pope, one of the candidates, had practically been drafted to enter the race, and had rallied around him people from both sides of the “political creeds”. In bold letters, it stated that Boise needed a mayor that will make sure public improvements “ARE DONE UNDER CONTRACT”. It also called for the city to patronize home industries in the awarding of contracts, thus giving employment to local people. The paper goes on to endorse Pope as the man who will do this. To many, the issue of voting for this bond became tied to the City’s ability to administer the funds efficiently. Even if they agreed with the need, the citizens hesitated to support the bond if the city couldn’t guarantee that the funds would be administered wisely. *The Statesman* even went as far as to suggest that the Council called for a bid in an attempt to calm the fears of the voters. Even though the paper thought it was a premature act, they conceded that it might reassure some voters that the bond would be administered fairly. Both candidates had come out in support of the bond. The question became, which candidate would be in charge of administering it.

The battle over cost went on, as the *Capital News* listed many cities that were spending anywhere from $550,000 to $1,850,000 to providing adequate airports with runways, hangars, and all the necessary equipment. It went on to
emphasize that the cities that had capitalized on railroad development, by getting in on the ground floor, had done so by encouraging the industry to grow. The *Statesman* editorials continued to ask how getting in on the ground floor would benefit the taxpayers. The great future of aviation was bantered about, but what exactly was this great future. Except for the few businesses, like the Airport Inn that had sprung up to service aviators, little apparent commerce could be seen. The paper revealed that there were only 14 Boise owned planes (including those used for the air mail service) housed at the airport, and that the taxpayers had already spent and estimated $56,000 on that facility to benefit those 14 planes and the other 6,500 owned throughout the United States. They went on to imply that the real advantages were to the aviation interests of certain companies that would use the airport. The paper noted that threats of what these companies would do without an improved airport seem to make up the bulk of the argument. The *Capital News* replied by pointing out that it had taken men of foresight and vision to appreciate what the main line of the railroad would do, and that they had been proven correct. After all, the selfish interest of the transportation companies hadn’t been an issue when developing the railroad.

Looking in hindsight, it is hard to imagine that the success of aviation commerce would ever have been called into question. But in 1929, aviation commerce was in the infancy stage of growth. Aviation really started as a spectator sport. Since the Wright brothers had taken to the skies, people had been captured by the thrill of flight. And it became apparent that when those men flew, people wanted to watch. On April 19, 1911, Walter Brookins, head of the Wright Brothers’ flying school, soared towards the heavens in the first plane to fly over Boise. He had taken off and landed from the spectator-lined tracks at the Idaho Fairgrounds. Soon, flying expositions became a familiar site in Boise as they offered a variety of daring stunts and theatrical reenactments. A popular stunt involved a race between an automobile and a plane. Others would thrill the spectators with dives and acrobatic shows featuring wing walking, or reenactments of famous battles reengineered to take place in the air.

The United States government really financed much of the early commercial use in aviation. During World War I, at the expense of the United States Government, the building of many planes had been commissioned, as well as the training of many young men as pilots. After the war, the government sold their stock of surplus planes and many of those trained pilots, were able to buy one for several hundred dollars. In an effort to make a living at something they had learned to love, these daring young men flooded the country with flying shows. Many took on the name of barnstormers, which was a term originally used by theatrical groups when they would go to rural areas to perform. These original flying shows featured men doing hair raising stunts in planes that would today be considered dangerous to fly in. Needless to say, it was a dangerous way to make a living, and many died in the early days of aviation. Pilots also were challenged by the lack of adequate places to land these early flying machines.
In 1919, the famous Victory Flying Circus came to Boise. Its purpose was to sell war bonds in an effort to raise twenty-one billion dollars to help pay for World War I. The planes in the circus, flown by former fighter pilots, recreated the famous dogfights of the war. Because of additional space requirements the City was forced to find a place, other than the fairgrounds, to facilitate landing. The Boise Barracks polo ground served the purpose, and the event drew 50,000 people to Boise.

By the mid 1920s, these early barnstormers were still struggling to carve out a livelihood and create some type of aviation industry. Harry Clark, one of these early aviators, wrote a series of letters to his wife Vivienne, dated from 1926 to 1935. These letters recounted the different jobs available in the early years of aviation commerce. He talked of the loads he flew, and of “landing the old ship” safely on the rough and dusty field he worked from. In one letter, Harry told his wife that he and 8 students were going to Mormon Days, and of their plan to make money with the two ships. He often mentioned the students he taught at the various locations he was flying from. In one letter he told his wife of a loan they were getting from his partner’s father. The loan would secure a new and safer ship. Financing those early aviation ventures proved to be difficult. The dangers of the profession were such that no one would give them insurance, and this made it almost impossible for banks to loan money to them. These early aviators often had to finance their projects with private funds. These letters also revealed many of the jobs that early aviators took on. They would transport small loads as well as occasionally take on passengers for a fee. They taught flying lessons, repaired planes and would perform at fairs and shows in order to make a living. Harry’s letters were postmarked from Los Angeles, Ogden, Reno, El Paso, Phoenix, and San Francisco showing the different places that work carried him. It proved to be a hard way to make a living but these early pilots loved to fly, so they continued to do what had to be done to stay afloat.

It turned out, that the remoteness of much of Idaho’s land aided in finding uses for aviation. Harry found a way to use his plane in the open ranch land of the Owyhee Mountains during the late 1920s. He watched over the snowed in ranchers of Owyhee County during the harsh winter months. This meant flying in supplies and medicine, and at times transporting people out for medical emergencies. His plane proved a welcome site during the bleak months in the backcountry of Southern Idaho.32

In the 1920s, mining companies started calling on mountain pilots to help transport supplies to remote areas. William Fahle, of the Placer Mining Company, explained his decision to use aerial transportation. “A plane could make six or eight trips a day carrying 650 to 700 pounds each trip while a pack animal’s load was 200 pounds”, and with the cost savings established, pilots started transporting supplies to his Moose City mine in 1925. They prepared a landing field that “Twas not so deep as a well nor so wide as a church, but ‘twas enough.” Of course, if a real landing field had been constructed the cost may not have
been so affordable. Another use of planes in the open spaces of Idaho came from Sheep Rancher John “Jock” Brockie. He bought a plane in 1927, and hired a pilot to help find his flocks in the remote grazing lands of the state.33 Flying services started to show up in Boise during this time. In 1926, Art Walters started the Boise School of Aviation. He came to Boise when Varney Mail made its maiden voyage in April of that year. Being impressed with the cities enthusiasm for flying he lost little time in moving to the area. Within days after arriving, Walters ran ads in the paper advertising his school and soon had 8 students.

But, besides these remote uses of aviation, and a few flying services like that of Art Walters, Boise could claim little business from aviation. The first solid evidence of strong aviation commerce came on April 18, 1929, when Walter Varney announced that his company would indeed start a passenger line service. The passenger line, starting August 1, 1920, would run between Portland, Ore. and Salt Lake City, and the route scheduled a stop at Boise.34 But, what did that mean to the citizens of Boise? Would this lead to a solid revenue line for the city? With little other aviation business seen in the state, it is easy to understand why The Statesman questioned the potential for the taxpayers.

The Chamber of Commerce, the Boise Fly Club and the American Legion were all busy on the days leading up to the bond election. To help promote the advancement of aviation commerce, they hosted several events. One event, a field day held at the airport, gave 10 lucky ticket holders a chance to soar to great heights during a promotion of aviation.35 The Statesman called their attempts an obvious ploy to stampede voters, but undaunted by their comments, the air-minded Boiseans filled the streets and papers with information about the benefits of aviation.36

Perhaps the most important event held right before the election turned out to be a preliminary Aeronautics Conference held in Boise on April 19, 1929. This conference was significant in its own right because it was the first aviation conference ever to be held. The conference promoters intended to gather interest for, and plan, a Western States Aviation conference later in July. The event hosted city leaders from Spokane, Portland, Seattle, Tacoma, San Francisco, as well as those from Western air transportation companies.37 It had been noted at this conference, that money had been made on the investment of many airports on the East Coast. This gave those in support of the airport expansion, another reason to encourage voters to approve the upcoming bond. During a luncheon for conference members, Idaho also received praise for its airways legislation.38 The last session of the legislature had enacted the Idaho Air Commerce Act of 1929, one of the first of its type in the United States. The act put into place many regulations for airports, pilot licenses and other issued which would give the new transportation industry a sound footing to build on.39 On April 23, 1929, the voters went to the polls and the result of the bond election disappointed those air minded citizens of Boise. The Bond had been defeated, 60 votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to pass. The mayoral election
had not been so close with J.P. Pope winning in a landslide. Immediately after the election, pro-aviation citizens went to work calling for a “no contest” vote on the bond issue, because some polling places had ran out of ballots. The council reviewed the voting and decided to readmit the issue to the voters. They also reviewed the new bids that had come in for the job and submitted a new bond proposal for $78,000. Even *The Statesman* thought it “fitting and proper that the question be resubmitted.” They stated that the issue had been close enough, and that “there may be some merit in the claim that many persons voted against the issue because they did not have faith in the efficiency of the Hansen administration and feared, in case Hansen was re-elected, that the money would not be spent to the best advantage.” But the paper went on to state, that they still did not believe that the airport improvement warranted an expenditure of that size.40 So, the campaign for the airport improvements went on, and ads and editorials continued to ring out for and against the issue. The citizens of Boise passed the bond in a June 6th election and they did finally have an improved airport, which went on to support the first passenger carrier service in the City.41

This issue shows how difficult developing different sectors of the community can be for city planners. Those on both sides of this issue had valid points. *The Statesman* brought up its opposition to spending money on an airport that may need to be moved. In hindsight, we know that this indeed was the case and the airport did move to a South Bench location. But, we also know that the improvement of the land had future benefits, since it would eventually become the site of the states largest university. Boiseans also have great pride in their Greenbelt and river area, which received great enhancement during the airport improvement.

In hindsight we see another advantage: the bond passed on the eve of stock market crash that brought on Great Depression. Would citizens in those hard times have even thought of improving the airport if they would have suspected that the financial systems of the country would suffer a devastating crash in four short months? The bonds may not have been available after that date, nor the citizens prepared to take the risk of the added cost to the city.

The depression did in fact have some impact on aviation during the next ten years. During this time, traveling became a luxury in the minds of most citizens, and this slowed the development of passenger service somewhat. But still, those pro-aviation citizens had been right about the future of aviation, and Idaho commerce did increase its use of flight despite the depression. But the real impact started in 1940, as the country geared up for a war. Aviation rapidly developed with the increase of military use in the area and the establishment of Gowen Field.42 Even though the development of aircrafts with longer flight time capabilities made Boise’s central location less of a benefit in commercial air travel, the state still prospered from aviation. Boise’s growth during this time, gave the passenger service a firm base of people who began to use flight as a viable means of transportation. Flying services, crop dusters, and aerial
firefighters also found their way to Boise, developing new uses for aviation and the growth of the industry.

Today the benefits seem obvious. In 1986, Hanley, Marjorie and Associates charted the economic benefits of aviation in Boise. In the chart below, direct benefits were those generated by businesses and organizations in the civilian and military sectors of aviation. Indirect benefits were those generated in non-aviation business due to aviation use or users. This would have included businesses that transport products by air, as well as those that benefit from tourist and business people flying to Idaho. Induced benefits represented the jobs created, or dollars spent, by those who have earned aviation funds in the state. These are typically called recycled dollars.

**Benefits of Aviation in Boise: Sales, Incomes, and Jobs, 1986**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Direct Benefits</th>
<th>Indirect Benefits</th>
<th>Induced Benefits</th>
<th>Total Economic Benefit</th>
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<td>Sales ($M)</td>
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Aviation did indeed become more than just sport, and eventually contributed greatly to the wealth of the state and the city. Boise’s airport grew and now holds the largest number of commercial fights in the state, not to mention housing commercial transport and private aviation concerns. But, if it hadn’t been for those early voters and champions of aviation within the citizenry, Boise may not have seen as much of this revenue. It may have even been an outlining area like Caldwell that would instead be the state hub for aviation.43
Endnotes

1 MS0709, Collection, Arthur Hart. Idaho State Historical Library.

2 “City to Call for Bids on Airport Work,” Boise Capital News, 9 April 1929. Pg 1; and ”City Council Meeting Minutes,” 23 June 1927. Boise City Hall.


4 “City Council Meeting Minutes,” 23 June 1927. The Boise City Hall.

5 “City to Call for Bids on Airport Work,” Boise Capital News, 9 April 1929. Pg 1; and ”City Council Meeting minutes,” 23 June 1927. Boise City Hall.

6 ”City Council Meeting Minutes,” 18 September 1928. The Boise City Hall.

7 “Plan would bring Local Field Up to Date,” Boise Capital News, 12 April 1929.

8 “Improvement Real Protection,” Boise Capital News, 16 April 1929.


21 “Don’t Take Chance On Hurting Your City!,” Boise Capital News, 10 April 1929.

23 “City to Call for Bids on Airport Work,” Boise Capital News, 9 April 1929. Pg 1.

24 “Don’t Take Chance On Hurting Your City!,” Boise Capital News, 10 April 1929.


32 Papers, Harry and Vivienne Clark. MS0728. Idaho State Historical Library.


41 Hart, 67.


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