

How to Create Airport Support

Simsbury Fly-in

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What do you call an event that offers many activities besides a display of aircraft? The Simsbury Fly-in is a community affair with important political and airport preservation aspects. It's an opportunity to educate the public about grass-roots aviation, and it provides major funding that helps keep our airport financially viable. The event includes a major car show, and it's a venue where local fire, ambulance, and police can demonstrate services. It also offers vendors an opportunity to display products. It's a great family outing that provides activities for kids.

In its 22nd consecutive year of operation, the Simsbury Fly-in has become the largest event of its kind in New England. On September 23, 2007, an estimated 10,000 spectators came, many of whom have come back year after year with their families. Jointly organized by EAA Chapter 324, the Simsbury Flying Club, and Valley Classic Wheels Car Club, the Simsbury Fly-in featured more than 220 display aircraft and more than 300 antique and classic autos, all on view for judging and trophies.

Part of the fun of any fly-in is seeing the interesting aircraft. Among the types that appeared this year were Fairchild, Fleet, Howard, Stampe, Boredom Fighter, Nanchang, North American, de Havilland, Ryan, Diamond, Cirrus, Allegro, Flight Design CT, Boeing, Thorp, Sport-Cruiser, Alon, Pitts, SportStar, Liberty, and many more. We scheduled flybys with interesting aircraft including a Fairchild PT-23, a Lancair Legacy, and an Extra 300. With each flyby, and with arrivals of interesting display aircraft,

we described the action on our public address system to educate the spectators in aviation history, homebuilding, and sport aviation. Later in the morning, we offered a demonstration of formation flying, featuring the Yankee Clipper squadron of four RV aircraft. Prominent this year was a "missing man" formation in honor of Joe Riek, EAA 72058, a local EAA member who recently passed away.

The earliest arrivals, even before sunup, were four commercial TV stations, ready for live coverage. This provided excellent publicity, and the coverage prompted many early morning viewers to attend. We also received feature cover-



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age before and after the event from our local TV channel.

The activities began with a pancake breakfast. As the day proceeded, we held two sky-diving exhibitions, one demonstrating landing accuracy and the other showing high-performance parachuting.

As the noon hour approached, the local fire and ambulance volunteers demonstrated how a victim is extracted from a wrecked auto, using the Jaws of Life. The Hartford Hospital's Life Star ambulance helicopter then arrived on a simulated mission to airlift the victim to the hospital. This demonstration was choreographed with a narrative over the PA system to explain what was happening, and how the victim received life-saving medical care. It was

a great opportunity for the local first responders to be recognized for the work they do.

Simsbury Airport is small and parking space for aircraft and cars is limited. To handle as many vehicles as possible, we carefully planned our parking layouts. Local Boy Scout troops assisted with car parking, and Civil Air Patrol cadets served as wing walkers (with an adult helper) for taxiing aircraft. These young people were a real help, and the experience gave them firsthand exposure to aviation they might not otherwise get.

In recent years, the fly-in has featured a full-color event brochure. This year, because of the number of new advertisers, the program reached 28 pages in size. You can see it on our website at www.SimsburyAirport.com. For those of you organizing aviation events, the program has proved to be a great source of advertising revenue. It also gives us an opportunity to tell our story through descriptions of our airport, of EAA, and of our role in the community. This year's program included several articles focusing special attention on the need for airport preservation.

Simsbury Airport (4B9) is a privately owned, public use airport with a 2,205-foot paved runway. Like many airports, we are concerned about the potential of property purchased for real estate development near the airport. The fly-in is a great way to show the local community the benefits of having an airport in its midst. Feedback from public officials convinced us that the fly-in is a major factor in our efforts to build good community relations. We believe this kind of publicity is much more effective than waiting until an airport is threatened and then mounting a defensive campaign. The most significant outcome of our community outreach is a recent decision by our town to undertake a formal planning study that we hope will demonstrate the benefits of town ownership of our airport. The study is underway, with a target completion



Photos courtesy of Simsbury Flying Club/Worley

date of mid 2008.

For those of you who are planning fly-ins or similar events, we offer a number of suggestions. First, we urge you to involve local community groups in your event. This not only provides volunteers to assist with event activities, but also it gives them visibility and recognition for services throughout the year. Involvement of this kind generates grass-roots support for the airport. It shows we have economic value, and that the airport is an integral part of the community.

We have discovered over the years that the military will often participate in events like this. We invite the National Guard, and often we have a booth for military recruiters. They

The Simsbury Fly-In featured a variety of aircraft, and visitors were able to get close to them and learn more about the benefits of general aviation and local airports.

Over 12,000 people visited the airport over the course of the event.

reciprocate by providing displays. This year and last a Blackhawk helicopter was on display, and it's a great crowd pleaser. Although not directly connected with the military, we also have display vehicles provided by a local club that restores old military equipment such as Jeeps, trucks, and sometimes a light tank.

An event of this kind doesn't



Display booths from several local aviation groups represented many interests.

Volunteers helped out with everything from marshalling aircraft to grilling hotdogs and burgers.



Photos courtesy of Simsbury Flying Club/Worley

Belonging to an EAA chapter enriches our aviation participation on two levels. The first is within the chapter itself, where we connect with others who share our passion. The second is how the chapter plugs into, participates with, and contributes to the surrounding community of recreational aviation. Our goal is to highlight chapter activities on both levels by showing how EAAers worldwide are getting the most of recreational aviation.

If you have a chapter story you'd like to share, please e-mail it to us at Editorial@EAA.org, or send it to:

EAA Publications
P.O. Box 3086
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require aerobatic acts. We do very well without them. Because aerobatic acts have a much higher requirement for FAA approval, they significantly increase insurance costs, and they involve airspace restrictions that inhibit the arrival and departure of display aircraft.

Be sure the spectators are able to see airplanes up close, but not so close that they harm the aircraft or are themselves in danger during taxiing. One of the best things you can do is give spectators the opportunity to talk directly with pilots about their aircraft. This is a great way to transmit general aviation's benefits to the non-flying public.

A word about safety is in order, especially dealing with aircraft movement on the ground. This point should be obvious, but be sure that spectators are kept well clear of any aircraft with its engine running. Wing walkers and a "Follow Me" golf cart guide every arriving aircraft to its parking space. We give every arriving pilot written ground rules for departure. Engines are not to be started until wing walkers are available to clear the crowd from all taxi routes to the runway and to assure that wing clearances are adequate.

Invite the media, both print and TV. While it's nice to see stories about the event after the fact, nothing generates spectators and display airplanes like a feature story several days prior. Local reporters are hungry for interesting stories. If you tell them about the action, sounds, photo opportunities, and involvement of local groups, most newspapers will want to write a feature story for publication in advance. Of course, you want to have the event listed in the "What's Happening" section of the local newspapers as well. Don't forget to list your event on the aviation websites and print publications. There are many such sites, and most are happy to publicize fly-ins at no cost.

Fly-ins offer wonderful photo opportunities. We invite the Simsbury Camera Club to take photos

of the event, and we have our own official photographer. The resulting photos are of great value in promoting the fly-in on websites and in print publications. This year we noted for the first time that a number of amateur and professional photographers had posted pictures of our fly-in on their own websites.

As you can imagine, an event this size requires a great deal of advance organization and preparation. Joe Bellino has served as event chairman for the past nine years. Joe leads a

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committee with designated leaders for each major area of activity: publicity, program, displays, food services, aircraft parking, car parking, aircraft communications, financial, setup, and cleanup. Each is responsible for making his or her aspect of the fly-in work effectively, and all serve on the fly-in committee. Planning meetings begin in the spring. During the summer, we are busy selling advertising for our event program, and obtaining permits. A debriefing meeting is held following the fly-in to capture our experiences as guidance for following years. A special focus of the debriefing is to make any changes in procedures that will improve safety.

As we look to the future, our most pressing issue is that the fly-in uses up all of our available airport space. We will be seeking ways to limit further growth without dramatically changing the nature of our event. We have considered expanding the fly-in to two days, but we believe this would stretch our resources too drastically.

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Photos courtesy of Simsbury Flying Club/Worley

Better to provide a one-day event that is successful than a two-day event that is poorly run.

We hope our story encourages you to expand (or hold) your own fly-in. It's a wonderful way to cement your relationship with your local community, to advance aviation, and to have fun. Visit www.SimsburyAirport.com and click on the fly-in link, where you'll find photos of our event. You are also welcome to contact Event Chairman Joe Bellino at jbellino@snet.net.

Bill Thomas is the airport manager at Simsbury Airport in Connecticut.

ABOVE: The refreshment area was a popular gathering place to meet and swap stories.

BELOW: Local band The Clams performed for the crowd at the event.

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EAA CHAPTER 1461

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