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Quest for a General Aviation Airport

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**The City of Oak Ridge and the Quest
for a General Aviation Airport**

by Matthew Cate

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Oak Ridge was founded in the early 1940's by the Federal government as a site for the manufacture of the atomic bomb. During its first two decades of existence, Oak Ridge was completely controlled by the United States government. However, the late 1950's saw the Department of Defense turn over all public lands to the local population, allowing the birth of the City of Oak Ridge. From the beginning, the leaders of Oak Ridge sought further growth for their new town. Almost instantly, civic leaders began to see the construction of a general aviation airport as a way to boost the economy of the town so dependent on its weapons plants. On October 10, 1960, Mayor A. K. Bissell appointed the twenty-four member Airport Study Committee, setting off a series of events that would continue for over twenty years.

Between 1960 and 1976, a total of ten separate airport site studies was conducted. In each instance the site selection process led to a dead end. Three studies failed because the site selected was unsuitable for use as general aviation airport. The remaining studies produced viable sites. However, these sites were either met by strong citizen opposition or ruled out because construction estimates were considered too expensive.

Up to this point, Oak Ridge had mainly relied on appointed committees composed of a variety of local leaders. Realizing that this course of action had failed to produce the desired results, the City of Oak Ridge sought additional help. In April 1977, the city applied to the Tennessee Bureau of Aeronautics and the Federal Aviation Administration for funding to develop an airport master plan. After funding was approved in February 1978, Buchart-Horn, Incorporated, was contracted to conduct the study.

The search process initially included sixteen sites in and around Oak Ridge. A short list of four sites was submitted by the consultant to the Oak Ridge City Council in July 1978. Of the sites, two were located outside the city's jurisdiction; one was located in Roane County, the other in Oliver Springs. After review of the preliminary report, the City Council decided that the selection of a location within the Oak Ridge City Limits would be a priority so that the city would see the maximum financial benefit.

With this change in priority, the site selection criteria were very specific. First, the City of Oak Ridge wanted a site located within its own corporate limits. Such a site would allow the city to recover part or all of its

cost of construction by collected taxes and fees on resulting development around the airport. Also, a location within Oak Ridge would assure that all city residents would be able to access the airport quickly.

Next, the city wanted a site that would be acceptable for non-precision instrument approaches in darkness and under certain weather conditions. This criterion was especially important because neither the FAA nor the TBA would fund any part of an airport that did not meet this standard. Vertical protrusions are the limiting factor for this criterion, thereby eliminating the valley sites from serious consideration.

The City also wanted an airport to be located away from residences, churches, schools, and other population centers. Safety, noise pollution, and air pollution are primary factors for this criterion. By meeting these criteria, the airport would have a minimal impact on existing development.

The next controlling factor in site selection was the estimated construction cost. The city wanted a site that would present minimal preparation costs while still meeting the remaining criteria.

The opportunity for development around the airport site was an important factor. The City felt that if an airport

was to be used as an incentive for companies to locate in Oak Ridge, the companies should be able to locate in an area that is easily accessible to the airport itself.

Preferably, this area would be within a two mile radius of the airport site.

Perhaps the most important factor to be considered in site selection was citizen acceptance. Because of the large amounts of money involved, it was extremely important that a majority of Oak Ridgers support the new airport. Also, the airport was not intended for use solely by commercial entities. The airport was to be available for the use of everyone in Oak Ridge and the surrounding communities. Also, if the site had owners unwilling to sell their land, the cost of an airport could be driven substantially higher by a lengthy court battle to obtain property. The city wanted to seek the "path of least resistance" in land acquisition.

Finally, the airport site had to be user-friendly. The airport had to be safe for pilots and passengers as well. A facility that met every other requirement was worthless if no one would use it. As previously mentioned, the site had to be approved for a non-precision instrument landing,

offering a much better level of safety than a visual landing in non-daylight situations.

With this additional clarification, Buchart-Horn returned to the Oak Ridge City Council in December 1979 with a new site recommendation. Upon further review, the consultant felt that the Chestnut Ridge site was now the best match to the site selection criteria. Among the advantages for the Chestnut Ridge site was the fact that its ridge-top location minimized airspace hazards and that no residences would be displaced by its selection. However, one major hurdle stood between the City of Oak Ridge and a Chestnut Ridge airport -- the University of Tennessee.

A majority of the Chestnut Ridge site was situated on land owned by the university as a part of the UT Arboretum. There was concern that an airport would disturb the research conducted at the Arboretum with both noise and air pollution. Also, a wild turkey study was being conducted on the section of the ridge that would be the airport.

Initially, the City of Oak Ridge's requests to purchase the land were met with resistance from the University. However, after a deal was made involving the city, the University, and the Department of Energy, UT agreed to turn the property over to Oak Ridge. In this deal, the DOE would

give a tract of land to the City of Oak Ridge. This land would then be exchanged with the University of Tennessee for the Chestnut Ridge site. At this point everything seemed favorable for the construction of an airport on Chestnut Ridge. However, things are not always as they seem.

During the process of negotiating with the University for the airport site, another opponent surfaced. Members of the UT Arboretum Society were concerned that the Arboretum would be negatively affected by an airport on this site. Also, there was concern that the city had selected this site solely on the basis that it would be the cheapest site to obtain. Construction of the airport would end several research projects, including a twenty-year irrigation and fertilization project that was in its fifteenth year. The group initially pushed for a public referendum on the airport issue. However, the possibility of a referendum was ended when a letter from Tennessee State Election Coordinator David Collins issued an opinion that stated that an election cannot be held without the expressed permission of the state legislature.

After the referendum issue was ended, the Arboretum Society carried its fight to the courts. The suit charged Mayor Bissell and two Oak Ridge Councilmen with violating

the Sunshine Law. The society contended that the trio made decisions regarding the environmental impact study for the Chestnut Ridge site in a closed-door meeting in Memphis with FAA District Operations Chief John Dempsey. Under state law, all public meetings must be announced in advance to afford the public an opportunity to attend.

In addition to opposition by the Arboretum Society, the airport also had to compete with other area transportation projects. By 1980, the estimated cost of the Oak Ridge airport had soared to \$13.8 million from initial estimates of only \$2.225 million in 1978. Also, plans had begun for the extension of the Pellissippi Parkway from its current end at Interstate 40 in west Knoxville to Alcoa Highway in Blount County.

The Pellissippi Parkway extension was seen primarily as a benefit for Blount Countians who commuted to Oak Ridge every day. However, an additional benefit of the extension would be improved access to Knoxville's McGhee Tyson Airport for the citizens of Oak Ridge. This highway would give Oak Ridge a significantly faster route to major commercial airline service, a far greater benefit to the citizens of Oak Ridge than access to private aircraft. Also, high ranking state officials felt that the state would not budget

funds for both an Oak Ridge Airport and the Pellissippi Parkway Extension. This scenario created a much darker future for the Oak Ridge airport because Governor Lamar Alexander, a Maryville native, would be far more likely to support the Parkway if forced to make a choice between the two projects.

Even without the Pellissippi Parkway Extension, the argument that Oak Ridge did not have easy access to an airport was in jeopardy. The notorious "Malfunction Junction" at the intersection of Interstates 40 and 275 in downtown Knoxville was being improved for the 1982 World's Fair. After construction, a major traffic problem between Oak Ridge and McGhee Tyson would be substantially improved.

After years of study and negotiations, the City of Oak Ridge came away empty-handed again. Opposition from the University of Tennessee Arboretum Society, improved access to Knoxville's McGhee Tyson Airport, and a general lack of support from the Oak Ridge population all combined to put an end to the city's most substantial bid for a general aviation airport.

In the process of seeking an airport site, the City of Oak Ridge made one serious mistake. Mayor Bissell and other civic leaders seemed to become caught up in the "glamour"

surrounding an airport. When the initial site selection process began in 1960, America still had a fantasy view of the future. People pictured a fantastic world full of robots and sight-seeing trips to the moon. At the time, an airport may have seemed essential to Oak Ridge's establishment as a modern city. What the city failed to consider was that it had the option to do nothing at all. The city continued to push for an airport even though every attempt was met with resistance. While Oak Ridge may be the only city of its size in Tennessee without its own airport, it is also the only city of its size so close to a much larger city (Knoxville). Oak Ridge is not as isolated from air travel as the city officials would have others believe. The completion of the Pellissippi Parkway has greatly reduced the time it takes to drive from Oak Ridge to McGhee Tyson, eliminating one of the major reasons for building an airport.

Another factor that was also overlooked is that the land around Oak Ridge is not "airport-friendly." In many cases, the rugged terrain in the area produces vertical obstacles that would make an airport dangerous. Many sites that would be suitable to an airport are held by the Department of Energy or the Department of Defense. Many of these sites

are part of vital weapons plants and research facilities and are definitely off-limits to the city. Also, the Defense operations create an abundance of airspace restrictions, further limiting potential airport sites.

While the City of Oak Ridge may have plenty of reasons to want a general aviation airport, it must also realize that the odds do not favor one. Despite the potential gains that could be made with a new airport facility, the situation surrounding this city of 30,000 people simply does not allow this luxury. Much as it has done in the past, the city must continue to make itself attractive to new investment without an airport. Perhaps someday the Oak Ridge airport will be cleared to land.

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