Next to the city of Medford, Oregon’s central business district, just north of the I-5/Highway 62 interchange, lies the 855 acres that are home to the Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport (MFR). Serving the Southern Oregon and Northern California regions, and the residents of Jackson County, MFR carried out over 43,000 aircraft operations in 2018, serving over a million passengers.

And right now, those numbers are growing. “We’re experiencing tremendous growth here in Southern Oregon. I want to say in part because of the management team, but a lot of it is we are so remote from any competition,” says Jerry Brienza, Director of the Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport. “We consider our competition to the south to be Sacramento, and our competition to the north is Portland and they are a four-and-a-half-hour drive away, unlike other airports where within two hours you can be at five different airports.”

As Oregon’s southernmost commercial service airport, MFR draws a lot of people from mid-to-southern Oregon as well as Northern California. The airport attracts passengers for commercial aviation and general aviation purposes. “People store planes here because of the tax advantages we have over California,” Brienza says. “They drive up or fly here commercially to pick up their aeroplane when they want to take it out. So, we are thriving because of that as well to the point where we are out of hangar construction spaces & building two new general aviation sites to support demand.”
“WE’RE EXPERIENCING TREMENDOUS GROWTH HERE IN SOUTHERN OREGON. I WANT TO SAY IN PART BECAUSE OF THE MANAGEMENT TEAM, BUT A LOT OF IT IS WE ARE SO REMOTE FROM ANY COMPETITION.”

VITAL SUPPORT

Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport is not only about serving passengers, however. Oregon, alongside Washington State and California, experience a tremendous number of forest fires, meaning the airport plays a vital role in the support of firefighting efforts. The airport provides a staging post for the forestry service and firefighters.

“We are expanding the ramp space they operate from by almost 300% to support those firefighting activities,” Brienza explains. “We can only park one VLAT [Very Large Air Tanker] at a time to fill up with fire retardant, and we are going to accommodate four firefighting apparatus at any one time. Our objective is to get them in, fill them up and get them out as fast as possible to fight and suppress those fires.”

The airport has also faced its own challenges, and like most of the aviation industry, it has just come through a challenging couple of years.

“As you can guess our passenger numbers were on the rise every year between 8-12% until the pandemic hit and they dropped by 50%,” Brienza recalls. “So, bringing those numbers back up to speed was a task. We have recovered quite nicely, but there are still pilot shortages. We lost a substantial number of airline representatives, not just pilots but airline staff in every facet of the industry.”

As customer demand has risen, it has been difficult to ensure staffing levels rise to meet it.

“After the pandemic people left just because they wanted out of the industry. A few other people left because of mandatory vaccines. So, the shortage became even worse,” Brienza points out. “We’re trying to bring folks back to work.”

However, Brienza also has the vision to train up the next generation of airline staff.
In an effort to spur economic development revenue, airport constructed a cargo facility that includes both office and garage space.

“To help the airlines we’ve been evaluating the opportunity to build an aviation centre of excellence here at the airport which would support the education needs not just for pilots but aircraft mechanics, aviation engineers, airport management,” he says. “It would be an aviation school of excellence that put people back into the workforce.”

It is an ambitious project, but it is not one the airport is looking to take on alone. Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport has established a partnership with a charter school and is offering a pilot programme for people as young as 16.

“We have people learning to fly before they even get their driver’s license!” Brienza laughs. The airport is working with the regional school district, high school superintendents, & regional community colleges as well as four-year degree universities.

“They are excited about participating in the aviation programs we’re tossing around,” Brienza says. “It is still a vision at this point, but we are doing due diligence to see if this is a possibility. It seems most educational organisations are on board with it, so we’re full steam ahead. It will be a $20 million investment in infrastructure, the building itself, taxiways & so on if it comes to fruition.”

“RIGHT-SIZED CITIES”
It is a worthy investment. Brienza is a keen advocate for the region.

“The weather’s outstanding. We don’t get a lot of rainfall, just enough to fill our lakes. We have a substantial number of sunny days, no wind, no cold winters,” Brienza points out. “We have a great tourism industry, including the second-largest Shakespeare festival in the world. We have 128 wineries just in our county alone. It’s a big vineyard area, and our economic development agencies are working on making this a Sportsplex area. We have state-of-the-art softball fields in the area and are starting work on a mega Sportsplex to bring people here internationally. It is just a fantastic area, one of those right-sized cities.”

Meanwhile, Rogue Valley International-Medford Airport has big plans for the future. As well as expanding the firefighting ramp, the airport’s expanded facilities will also serve cargo operations.

“We have a tremendous amount going on. The Antonov stops in our airport half a dozen times a year. We are expanding our aprons to bring in more G8 aircraft and pilots,” Brienza says. “We are looking at terminal improvements, expanding our terminal footprint. We are exceeding capacity at the terminal because of our growth in passengers. It is nice we are at 2019 levels again, but we need to grow with that. By 2040 our numbers are forecast to double, so we really need to start planning for terminal expansion today.”

IT WILL BE A $20 MILLION INVESTMENT IN INFRASTRUCTURE, THE BUILDING ITSELF, TAXIWAYS AND SO ON IF IT COMES TO FRUITION.”