

Benefits of our Grand Marais/Cook County Airport and How our Airport May Change in the Decades to Come

Ann Sullivan

In my role as District 4 County Commissioner, I serve on the Airport Advisory Commission. Over the last five years, I've learned a great deal about airport operations, the benefits of our airport to residents and visitors, along with changes in the industry and aeronautical needs for Cook County today and into the future. Before gazing into the future, it requires that one have some background information on our current airport.

The Grand Marais/Cook County Airport is a vital transportation hub in northeastern Minnesota, offering significant economic, safety, and logistical benefits to our county and region. As a well-maintained general aviation facility, the airport plays a crucial role in supporting local businesses, tourism, emergency services, and government operations.

The airport facilitates economic growth by providing essential access for businesses, entrepreneurs, and tourists. It enables companies to transport goods and personnel efficiently, fostering local commerce and investment. The airport also supports tourism, the primary economic driver in Cook County, by accommodating private aircraft bringing visitors who contribute to the local economy through lodging, dining, and recreation.

The airport is a critical asset for emergency services, including air ambulance transport for medical emergencies. In a remote location like ours where ground transportation to major hospitals can take hours, air medical services significantly reduce response times, improving patient outcomes. The facility also supports law enforcement and wildfire suppression efforts, enhancing public safety.



Years ago, a benefit-cost analysis was completed, prior to our runway extension, and that indicated the longer, wider runway would improve regional and national safety and security. There was a comparison of capital and operating costs to the annual number of forest fires, types and costs of fighting those fires from the air,... The benefit cost ratio (BCR) was 1.42; that just means the benefits significantly outweigh the costs (1.0 is break even). That 1.42 BCR indicated to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) that our project was a very important project to financially support. In recent years, we have seen the benefits with DNR firefighting aircraft, air ambulance and medical flights, U.S. Customs and Border Protection aircraft, along with more typical corporate and general aviation activity.

By providing a reliable air transportation option, the Grand Marais/Cook County Airport improves regional connectivity. It enables government agencies, researchers, and conservationists to access the area efficiently for projects related to natural resource management, environmental studies, and public infrastructure development. Flights in and over the BWCAW and our state forests, along with hundreds of flights to and from Isle Royale, are an important contributor to our local economy.

Our airport serves general aviation pilots and aviation enthusiasts, offering opportunities for flight training and recreational flying. Its infrastructure, including the longer runway, ensures safe and efficient operations year-round.

Increased commercial passenger and air cargo activity is in the forecast at our airport given local resorts, Grand Portage tribal activities, wilderness outfitters, and the projected increase of cargo deliveries as our population continues to grow. Medical evacuation missions may direct patients to Duluth, the Twin Cities or other regional hospitals, as well as the Mayo Clinic in Rochester.

The Grand Marais/Cook County Airport is an essential asset for northeastern Minnesota, supporting economic vitality, emergency response, and regional accessibility. Continued investment in its infrastructure and operations will ensure it remains a valuable resource for residents, businesses, and visitors alike.

On Monday, May 12 from 5-7 p.m. there will be an Open House at the Cook County Courthouse to learn about the proposed Master Plan for our airport, which will guide upgrades and changes



to the airport over the coming decades. MnDOT Aeronautics and the FAA have weighed in on our proposed Master Plan. The Airport Advisory Commission looks forward to showing you what might be in store for the airport in upcoming decades and getting your feedback. We are inviting you to attend our Master Plan Open House to learn more. We hope to see you on Monday, May 12, so you can gaze into the future to see what changes may be on the horizon for our airport.