

Defining Leadership Roles at the Athens-Ben Epps Airport

The Challenge of Managing Managers

Aircraft, runways, and terminals are often the most visible parts of an airport's operations. Less apparent is the complex interplay between airport policy makers (such as boards, commissions, and authority members) and managers that occurs behind the scenes. For airports to run smoothly and efficiently, these leaders must work together to understand the federal, state, and local regulations and nuances that govern their activities. However, airports often face financial constraints when training newly appointed policy makers who lack first-hand experience managing an airport and don't yet have the institutional knowledge necessary to effectively plan for the airport's future.

This was a familiar challenge for the Athens-Ben Epps Airport (AHN), a Part 139, public-use general aviation airport in Athens-Clarke County, Georgia. When Beth Higgins was appointed as a member of the Airport Authority Board and Chairman of the Air Service Development Committee in 2015, AHN had no structural

waypoints to guide its relatively young board in its relationship with owners and management. Without this vital foundation at the leadership level, the airport faced a major roadblock to achieving its long-term goals. That's where *ACRP Report 58: Airport Industry Familiarization and Training for Part-Time Airport Policy Makers* came into play.

Building Leadership Capacity

As AHN considered how to educate its board members, Higgins looked to ACRP. Drawing on experience leveraging ACRP publications in the past, she sought out a report that would help the airport establish a solid baseline for understanding the current state of its board and determine where it could go from



there. *ACRP Report 58* was an especially useful resource.

ACRP Report 58 includes a primer that outlines the distinct yet interrelated roles, responsibilities, and best practices for policy makers, who are not involved in full time management activities,



Above: Plane parked at Athens-Ben Epps Airport (Source: Beth Higgins and Mike Matthews, Athens-Ben Epps Airport).

and airport managers, who provide day-to-day oversight and direction. More specifically, part-time policy makers establish the goals and objectives that airport managers must then accomplish by implementing relevant programs. The primer also describes financial considerations for airport leadership, rules and regulations governing airport operations, and ways that national issues impact local airports.

Using ACRP Guidance to Anticipate and Address Change

For AHN, one of the most useful aspects of *ACRP Report 58* is the way it distinctly defines the roles of an airport policy maker. This gave AHN's board a clear direction as it began developing its own roles and procedures. The report also provided AHN with guidance on how to potentially modify its board, helped the board establish a

training system for newly appointed members, and provided useful checklists to help new members understand their roles and gain the knowledge necessary to effectively oversee the airport.

In 2017, AHN experienced a large turnover of board membership. Because it is deeply involved in decision-making about the airport's financial management, the board knew it must ensure that AHN's financial operations continued to run smoothly during the transition. Higgins used *ACRP Report 58* to develop a detailed presentation about how to finance a small commercial airport, which she presented to the airport board and ex-officio members. The presentation drew on the report findings to address all aspects of operating expenses, capital budgets, and a variety of funding mechanisms, such as state grants and the Airport Improvement Program administered by the Federal Aviation Administration.



Above: Planes parked at Athens-Ben Epps Airport (Source: Beth Higgins and Mike Matthews, Athens-Ben Epps Airport).

“When I came on the board, there weren't a lot of structural waypoints in terms of how [it] operated in relationship to management. I used ACRP products, since there's almost a product for every single aspect of airport management and governance... to help train and develop the board in terms of its relationship to the airport and community.”

— Beth Higgins, Airport Authority Board Member and Chairman of the Air Service Development Committee at Athens-Ben Epps Airport

Keeping the Board One Step Ahead

Today, Higgins continues to share lessons learned and best practices from *ACRP Report 58* with all new board members at AHN. Furthermore, she anticipates that other ACRP reports also will play an important role in guiding the board's future growth and development, emphasizing that the “the ability to pull out the most important details first, then a very detailed analysis and case studies on other airports” makes the reports “extraordinarily useful.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF SPONSORSHIP: This work was sponsored by the Federal Aviation Administration and was conducted in the Airport Cooperative Research Program, which is administered by the Transportation Research Board of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

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