

After 80 years, is Thermal's Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport poised to take off?



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On a brisk January afternoon, well-dressed guests gather outside the cavernous entrance of a new aircraft hangar in Thermal. James McCool, owner of private jet business Desert Jet, takes the podium to speak on his company's recent growth and plans for the airport.

"Twenty-two years ago, this was a dust bowl," McCool says, quipping that the wind still brings in dust on occasion.

"But look around," he continues, gesturing to the private jets encircling the guests. "Look at the jets. Look at the traffic. Look at the buildings, not just here but around our community. We're growing."

The Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport has played many roles since its inception as a remote Army air base in World War II. It has hosted record-setting test pilots, crop dusters for Coachella Valley farms, a regional mail service and pioneers of the fledgling commercial aviation industry before settling into its main modern moneymaker — private jet services.

Now the airport, which turns 80 this year, could be set for a new phase of growth. Plans underway by airport executives and county officials could expand existing services at the airport, add new businesses and draw in a broader range of high-end aviation clients.

This, they say, could bring a raft of high-quality jobs to the area and improve economic opportunities for locals in a historically impoverished area of the Coachella Valley — although exactly how long that may take is up in the air.

Military to mail delivery

The Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport — simply called Thermal Airport for most of its history — was built in the early days of World War II. It was designed to support U.S. Army forces' preparations for the "Operation Torch" invasion of North Africa, a region with a similar desert climate.

The U.S. Navy assumed control of the base later in the war, upgrading its facilities and using it as a training center for Navy air operations. At its peak, the roughly 2,500-acre facility had two 5,000-foot runways, a hospital and living quarters for thousands of service members.

After the war, the base was declared surplus and transferred to the War Assets Administration, which, in turn, transferred most of it to Riverside County in 1948.

The airport played host to several of the biggest names in aviation during the early post-war years. It was frequented by Chuck Yeager, the first person to officially break the sound barrier, and Jacqueline Cochran, the first woman to break the sound barrier. The airport was renamed after Cochran in 2004 as a nod to her longtime usage.

These high-flying early days for the airport were followed by several lower-profile decades. The facility serviced a revolving door of smaller-scale enterprises in the 50s, 60s and 70s.

"You had a quiet little country airport for many years," said Larry Gayler, 75, a lifelong Thermal resident who has been involved with the airport since the 1950s.



Gayler, who worked for crop dusting operations at the airport as a teenager, said the post-war resurgence in agriculture in the eastern Coachella Valley made farm services the most logical early use of the airport.

These were soon joined by flights from the fledgling commercial aviation industry via Bonanza Airlines, a service that ran regional passenger flights in the western United States and — through a later series of mergers — would eventually become part of what is today Delta Airlines. Gayler said aviation regulations at the time required commercial aircraft to make frequent stops, meaning passengers bound from Arizona to Los Angeles would have to stop in Thermal.

These stopover requirements were lifted in the late 1960s, Gayler said, after which point passenger air services elected to bypass the Thermal airport and head directly to Palm Springs.

Around this time, the airport began supplying airmail services to the area. Gayler, who had been working as a charter pilot, began ferrying mail between the desert outpost and Los Angeles five nights per week.

As new pest-resistant crops and ground-based pesticide application methods grew in popularity, Gayler said the viability of crop dusting services gradually declined. The airmail service was also discontinued in the 1970s.



The seeds of development

Various plans for developing the airport and building it into an economic driver for the region have been ongoing since the 1980s. A lobbying organization dubbed "Friends of Thermal Airport" was established in 1987 with lofty ambitions.

"I think we could end up having the biggest airport in the southwestern United States," Fergus Homme, then-executive director of the organization told *The Desert Sun* in 1989.

The group pushed a range of development initiatives, such as securing federal funding to create an airport master plan. The funding was granted in 1988 and the airport's first master plan was approved by the Riverside County Board of Supervisors in 1991. That plan included recommendations to improve runways and other basic infrastructure, many of which were implemented by the county in the following years.

Friends of Thermal Airport also pushed a much-discussed project aimed at establishing an "enterprise zone" in the area around the airport which would provide tax incentives to businesses to encourage them to invest in the area. That plan came to fruition in 1991 when 27,000 acres around the airport received the enterprise zone designation.

It's unclear what impact the enterprise zone had on development at the airport. It was set to expire in 2007, but was granted a 15-year extension. That second term was cut short, however, when then-Governor Jerry Brown signed Assembly Bill 93 in 2013, eliminating the enterprise zone program statewide.

Public records suggest Friends of the Thermal Airport disbanded sometime in the mid-to late-2000s. The organization's federal tax exempt status was revoked in 2010 for failing to file tax returns for three years and its California business license is listed as suspended.

Records about historical airport utilization are spotty, making it difficult to authoritatively assess the effectiveness of these early development initiatives. A 1995 *Desert Sun* article indicated the airport had only one aircraft servicing company leasing 10 acres of land at the time, suggesting that they made at least some contribution to significant growth at the airport in the following decades.

Reaching new heights

Today, roughly 300 acres are leased for use across about 1,750 total acres of airport land, according to Riverside County. There are 134 aircraft hangars on the property, officials said, including 64 "box hangars" for multiple aircrafts and 70 smaller single aircraft hangars.

Three aircraft servicing companies, known as fixed-base operators, or FBOs, provide fueling, storage and other services. Two of these, Desert Jet and Thermal Aviation, are local operations headquartered at the Thermal airport. The third, Ross Aviation, is a major national FBO chain based in Denver, Colorado.

The airport also hosts law enforcement and medical aircraft services via a 12,000-square-foot California Highway Patrol air base and a 7,000-square-foot Mercy Air medical transport base.



Cash flows into the airport are not centrally tracked, but most businesses agree private jets and related services are now the biggest revenue driver.

"As far as the rich people goes, it's like taxes," said Thermal Aviation manager Dan Obradovich. "They pay the majority of (income) taxes; they pay the majority of the operating costs here at the airport."

Thermal Aviation primarily serves smaller planes owned and operated by individual pilots for uses such as hobbyist flying, which have a sizeable presence at Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport. The business sells self-serve fuel and rents 92 — mostly small — hangars built by the company in the early 2000s.

Despite its sizeable presence at the airport, Obradovich estimates that his company only makes up an average of about 10% of the airport's fuel sales each year. Such sales are a central revenue generator for airport businesses. He attributed this primarily to the size of the smaller aircraft that Thermal Aviation caters to relative to the larger jets serviced by Desert Jet and Ross Aviation.

"You get some of these Gulfstream (jets) flying in from Florida or other places, they can be taking 2,000 gallons (of fuel)," Obradovich said. "It would take a lot of piston plane activity to use that much fuel."

Desert Jet, the newest and geographically smallest of the airport operators, focuses almost exclusively on private jet clients. It has three main lines of business centered on fueling and concierge services, aircraft maintenance and charter flights respectively.



Unlike Thermal Aviation, which Obradovich said is relatively content with the status quo at the airport, Desert Jet is set on aggressive growth — both for itself and the airport as a whole.

The company currently operates out of a sleek new 40,000-square-foot hangar and office facility dubbed Desert Jet Center. It plans to boost that footprint within another large facility in the next two years, according to Desert Jet owner McCool.

"I needed it yesterday," McCool said, noting the company's current hangar space is fully occupied with a waitlist for any openings.

The Desert Jet owner said rapid growth in recent years has left him highly confident in the airport's near and long-term prospects. He cited a recent study commissioned by Desert Jet from consulting firm FBO Partners showing a 25% compound annual growth rate in number of flights at the Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport over the past three years. He said the study found the airport ran significantly more flight operations than Palm Springs International Airport did last year, although many of those were smaller than the large commercial flights that frequent Palm Springs.

Riverside County is also planning for growth at the airport. The county kicked off a development study on in January aimed at identifying airport land available for commercial development, possible uses complementary to existing businesses and any other feasibility and development considerations for each parcel, according to county Airports Manager Angela Jamison.

"We do get quite a bit of interest from a variety of different companies," Jamison said, adding that the lack of a clear development plan makes it difficult for the county to make well-informed decisions about the best businesses and uses to allow and promote at the airport

"I feel very strongly that airports are an economic catalyst for economic development for the region," Jamison said. "Part of that is developing smartly and not just ad-hoc, not just taking whoever comes when they come, but figuring out what you want, what's best for the airport, what's best for the county, what's best for the region as a whole."

Jamison said the initial phase of the development study will take approximately six months, after which the county will begin to solicit companies to come to the airport, dependent on its findings and demand at the time.

"We get a lot of interest from corporate users who want to just build a private hangar and there's a place for that," Jamison said. She noted that hotels and restaurants are also a common proposition and are something the county would consider, especially if the development study found them to be servicing a clear airport demand.



Jamison said the county is also working on procuring a Federal Aviation Administration control tower for the airport. Such towers are used to direct the flow of air traffic to create a safer flying environment. The process of acquiring such a tower can be lengthy and expensive. Some companies and individuals have policies against flying into airports without control towers, meaning the move would both improve airport safety and broaden the range of potential airport users.

Riverside County applied for an FAA control tower in September 2019 in anticipation of growth at the airport, according to Jamison. She said the county has been “aggressively following up with the FAA” about the tower, but does not have a clear timeline for when or if that application might be approved.

The request is running parallel to another, possibly long-shot, county request for a U.S. customs and immigration station at the Jacqueline Cochran Regional Airport. Such a station would allow international flights to land directly at the airport rather than first travelling to a larger airport such as Palm Springs International. Jamison said the county has been rejected in two prior applications for the customs and immigration station, in 2015 and 2018, but reapplied again last year.

“One of the major challenges we have in doing that is we are very seasonal,” Jamison explained. “We really don’t have enough activity to keep a (Customs and Border Protection) officer year round. So we’re looking at ways that we could share an officer or other ways that we could get that amenity for our tenants.”

McCool and local representatives of Ross Aviation — which also serves private jets as a major part of its business at the airport — said the FAA control tower and the customs and immigration station would both be significant boosters for business. The new capabilities, they said, could increase their range of potential clients at the airport, particularly among private and corporate jet users.

Upward mobility for locals?

Businesses and county officials say development at the Thermal airport could add high-quality jobs and lead to more economic opportunities in one of the Coachella Valley’s most historically impoverished communities.

Roughly one-third of the Thermal population lived below the poverty line in 2019, according to U.S. Census Bureau’s American Communities Survey. The survey found the area had a median annual household income of just over \$30,000.

Unlike other career avenues, Desert Jet CEO Jared Fox said aviation jobs allow Thermal residents to remain local while still having opportunities for upward mobility through “high-paying technical jobs.”

“Whether that be pilot, aircraft mechanic, line service,” Fox said, “these are jobs that when you develop and have a skill set are useable for your entire life and really can elevate you as an individual.”

Fox said about half of Desert Jet’s 52 employees are eastern Coachella Valley locals. He pointed to the story of Desert Jet Center’s General Manager as an illustration of the opportunities aviation careers could bring to the area.

Roman Mendez, 33, was born and raised in the eastern Coachella Valley. The Desert Jet Center GM said he was attending a nursing program at College of the Desert when a part-time job at the airport sparked his interest in aviation.

“I never really knew a lot about aviation,” Mendez said. “You think of aviation, you think of pilots, you think of airlines. So that was my general understanding of what aviation was to that point.”

“For me, it wasn’t something that was a career, it was a means to an end of a job, of attending college,” he added.

Mendez said he began pumping gas for a company called Signature Flight Support and “unintentionally” worked his way up to client-facing work. When he graduated from College of the Desert, Mendez said he reevaluated his career options and decided that continuing on in aviation was better suited to his goals.

“It allowed me the opportunity to grow, develop and build a career and actually stay local, which was a big thing,” he said, noting that his strong family ties to the area made leaving difficult.



Mendez said he was asked to join Desert Jet in 2016 by the company's founder, Denise Wilson, who he had worked with as a client during his prior job at the Thermal airport. By 2018, he had been promoted to general manager of the company's FBO business.

The GM said that, while his journey from line worker to executive was somewhat exceptional, he had seen numerous other instances of local workers moving from low-level positions to roles such as managers, pilots, charter coordinators and aircraft mechanics.

"To be a part of this and to show my colleagues and the residents here that someone who looks like me, who has my background, my story, can be in this type of role is very exciting," Mendez said. "I've got a seat at the table and it's something that I'm very fortunate and very proud to have."

Mendez also noted his company works with aviation programs at two eastern Coachella Valley schools, Shadow Hills High School and Desert Mirage High School, to educate and build interest in aviation careers among local youth. Desert Jet, Ross Aviation and Thermal Aviation all have some level of involvement with those programs, providing shadowing, internship and other hands-on learning opportunities for students. Most of those activities were derailed by the COVID-19 pandemic, although company leaders say they are working to get them back on track in the near future.

Gayler, who has seen the airport grow from a dusty rural air strip to the burgeoning private jet hub it is today, said he is upbeat about development and the opportunities it might bring. He said that, while it is a bit sad to see some of the camaraderie among pilots at the smaller airport diminish, he is glad to see a growing interest in aviation in the area.

The longtime Thermal pilot noted he was somewhat skeptical about the ability of planned development initiatives to push growth at the airport. He attributed much of its expansion in recent decades to broader organic growth in the eastern Coachella Valley, particularly at upscale developments like Andalusia Country Club, The Quarry and The Madison Club in La Quinta.

He said such organic development was likely to set the pace for future growth at the Thermal airport, marking a slow, steady climb in the years ahead.

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