

Tom Sharp, Jr.

Tom Sharp, Jr., is a local businessman who became the driving force in developing a general aviation airport serving a key region of the state. Founder of the Madison County Executive Airport, he has played a vital and continuing role in establishing that airport to serve the Huntsville area. He has also promoted general aviation throughout the state through founding directorship in the Aviation Council of Alabama.

Tom Sharp, Jr., was born in Huntsville, Alabama, in 1952. In 1979 he started Sharp Communication in Huntsville. This business grew from a one-room electronics repair shop into a successful company offering a broad range of commercial and industrial services and products.

Sharp began his flying in 1972. To increase his flight experience, he started ferrying aircraft for Huntsville Aviation, which was located at Huntsville International Airport. He became a commercial-rated pilot in 1979 and has over 3800 hours total time. He also acquired his own aircraft, which he used for his own company.

A turning point for Sharp came in 1992, when the owner offered North Huntsville Airport for sale. This airport lay just a mile from the town of Huntsville. It was individually, privately-owned facility and was the only general-aviation airport in the area. The airport had only a 3750-foot runway, a few shade hangars, and an old metal office building. The land seemed likely to wind up in the hands of a developer for use other than aviation. As an alternative, Sharp envisioned developing North Huntsville into a public, business, and corporate airport.

Turning the vision into reality proved challenging. To make the conversion required obtaining official action. At the time the Huntsville Madison County Airport Authority had jurisdiction for Huntsville International Airport. Tom went to the chairman and talked about the possibility of purchasing this property. The airport authority did not initially see a successful outcome from the venture. Next Sharp and another pilot, Smith Haywood, decided to contact each of the Madison County commissioners individually. Sharp and Haywood hoped to persuade the commission to consider forming a separate Madison County Airport Authority. Having that body could let plans to obtain the airport proceed. While the commissioners were receptive to the idea of having such an airport, they were not ready to commit public funding to the project. So the agreement to form the Madison County Airport Authority included a provision that the county would not have to fund the airport operations. The approach through the



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two avenues had a seemingly peculiar result. While the Madison County Commission agreed to form its own airport authority, the Huntsville-Madison Airport Authority reconsidered and reversed their initial decision. By that point, though, the county commissioners had been won over and voted to establish their own airport authority in 1993. Thus, Madison County wound up with two, distinct airport authorities for its two airports.

At this point Sharp had an official basis for establishing an airport but still had to find some way to effect the purchase. The key lay in obtaining funds from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). To qualify for any FAA funding, the new airport authority needed a bank account. Sharp loaned the new authority \$500 to open an initial account. Sharp and Haywood then flew to Washington to get further support. They approached Senator Howell Heflin and asked his help in obtaining FAA money to purchase the old airport. The key here was the Airport and Airway Trust Fund, created in 1971 to improve America's air transportation system. This fund was paid for by taxes on aviation fuels, airline tickets, and air freight. Since 1980 grants from the FAA's Airport Improvement Program (AIP) have given airports vital help with such things as runways, lighting, and weather stations. The AIP is invaluable in that it requires a local agency to start with only a 10-percent investment. So a small town investing \$100,000 can allow \$1 million in improvements to the local airport. Moreover, the AIP's major goal is to foster a nationwide system of public-use airports that can meet future growth of civil aviation. Doing this includes ensuring that fund-

ing is available to small general aviation and non-hub commercial service airports. Heflin arranged for Sharp and Haywood to meet with FAA representatives, but the FAA said they lacked funds to purchase a private airport. However, with Senator Heflin's urging, the FAA representatives were able to agree to \$2.2 million of the 90/10 matching money. The commitment of FAA funding was also valuable in assuring community support to the project. Accepting federal funds for improvements entails a commitment to operate the airport for at least the next 20 years. At this point, the remaining task was to find the 10 percent privately. Sharp and Haywood went to a local bank, which let the authority secure the 10-percent match to be paid back by local user fees. On this basis the airport was purchased and work began. Additionally, a neighbor was willing to donate land for a larger runway. This donation counted enough to meet the requirement for the authority's local match. In 2001 a ribbon was cut celebrating a 5008 foot runway.

Based on the initial success and continued efforts, the now-named Madison County Executive Airport has continued to develop. In 2002 the ribbon was cut for a new, \$1-million, Smith Haywood terminal building. As of 2006 the airport has over \$17 million in improvements. By 2006 the airport was home to about a dozen businesses including a scheduled charter airline and an air ambulance service, along with about 90 other aircraft. In August 2006 a new, \$1-million hangar facility opened. This was leased to Yulista -- a unique, Native American company that has won an award for small businesses doing military contracts. The airport also looked forward to lengthening its runway to handle freighter traffic, as well as to improving its industrial development, airport lighting and instrument approaches.

Having adequate aviation services in this part of the state is vital to both aerospace and the state. In 2002, Huntsville and the surrounding area -- Madison, Morgan, Cullman counties -- accounted for \$4.16 billion, more than two-thirds of the state's total aerospace payroll. Throughout Tom Sharp has been a driving, guiding presence. He personally oversaw almost every detail, including obtaining and installing state signage. In recognition of his unique contributions, the Madison County Airport Authority decided to call the airport Tom Sharp, Jr., Field.

