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## R.I.'s other airport businesses: Beyond T.F. Green, there are lean machines

Every month, as reports show how many passengers travel through T.F. Green Airport, Rhode Islanders are reminded of the economic impact of the state's biggest airport.

But the state also is served by five smaller general-aviation airports, each an engine of commerce.

The Rhode Island Airport Corporation, the state agency that runs Green, also controls Quonset State Airport in North Kingstown, North Central State Airport in Smithfield, Westerly State Airport, Block Island State Airport and Newport State Airport, in Middletown.

Businesses at the general-aviation airports range from a restaurant and a company that tows aerial banners to flight schools and skydiving excursion operators to shops that maintain aircraft and companies that run hangars. And all of that is in addition to AvPorts, the outfit that runs day-to-day operations under contract with the airport corporation.

Family is a common theme with many of the companies at Newport State Airport.

Take Marc Tripari of Skydive Newport.

"We're actually a family business," he said.

Then there's Jeff Codman of Bird's Eye View Helicopters.

"I grew up flying with my father," Codman said. "We just progressed from airplanes into helicopters."

**And Heather Corson**, of Newport Aviation, which offers flying lessons and rents planes.

"I've been in aviation my entire life," Corson said. "Instead of packing up the station wagon to visit Grandma and Grandpa in New Hampshire, we packed up the aircraft."

Corson started her business 14 years ago. "There were a lot of people just walking in wondering if there's a flight school here," she said. She started with a single plane that first year and turned a profit.

Now, she operates two four-seater, single-engine prop planes: a Piper Cherokee and a Piper Warrior.

Nearly three-quarters of her business is flying lessons. Students typically spend \$8,000 to \$10,000 over a four- to six-month period to earn their pilot's license.

"The war college is probably 90 percent of my business," she said. The typical 10-month stint for students at the U.S. Naval War College at Naval Station Newport leaves plenty of time for flying lessons, she said. She also gets a fair number of F/A-18 pilots from the college who want to rent a small plane, often for lunchtime trips to Block Island, Nantucket or Martha's Vineyard.

Corson and a flight instructor are the only year-round employees, though she hires part-timers in the summer. Between lessons and rentals, she has a couple of hundred customers a year.

**After working** for others, Jeff Codman started his helicopter business in 2000, using a \$110,000 U.S. Small Business Administration loan to buy a helicopter built in the 1970s. "A lot of people, they didn't realize it's that old."

About nine-tenths of his business is sightseeing aerial tours. His new helicopter, a 2013 Robinson R44 Raven I, takes three passengers plus the pilot. Excursions start with a \$75, 12-minute tour of Newport's famous mansions.

He also takes aerial photographs, at \$600 for any spot in Rhode Island. "The drones the last couple of years have put a decline on the photography," he said, adding that he doesn't see himself joining the ranks of pilots of the small, remote-controlled helicopters. "There's too many people in the drone market. I don't think there's going to be any money in it."

Codman has seen Newport State Airport grow in his 15 years there. "When I first started here, there wasn't enough room for an office." He had to resort to a small desk on wheels. Now, he has space for his three full-time employees, plus a couple of more seasonal staffers.

The business helps keep him afford his passion. "Flying a helicopter is so expensive," he said. "Otherwise, I couldn't if I was just flying as a hobby."

**Marc Tripari's business** has been falling steadily for the last 17 years. Literally.



A customer at Newport State Airport fuels a twin-engine plane at the self-serve Av Fuel station. An array of businesses at the state's smaller airports thrive on offerings ranging from maintenance to skydiving. The Providence Journal/Bob Breidenbach

He estimates that 1,000 to 2,000 people a year skydive with his company, with the numbers jumping around a bit. "It's a very weather-dependent business."

He has been located at the airport since 1999 and has a staff of 10. After working throughout New England and in New York and Florida, he chose Newport for the scenic views from aloft: Narragansett Bay, big bridges, sailboats.

He charges \$230 for a tandem jump, in which the customer is strapped to an instructor, and they jump together. Jumpers have run the gamut from 18-year-olds jumping on their birthday, the first day they legally can, to a woman in her 90s. And they jump for all sorts of reasons, from bachelorette parties to corporate bonding activities to people celebrating divorce. He likens skydiving to the dreams most people have in which they are flying. "This is really flying," he said. "This is the dream come true."

And like dreams, skydiving is safe, Tripari said. "We tell people the most dangerous part of their day is driving here and driving home," he said. "We consider ourselves a lot safer than skiing."

Like Codman, Tripari has seen the airport grow in his years there.

"It was definitely podunk, just a couple of old sofas in the middle of the lobby," he said.

Now, Skydive Newport is in its own brand-new building.

### **The roster: Where business takes off in R.I.**

In addition to AvPorts, which manages the state's five general aviation airports under contract with the Rhode Island Airport Corporation, the following companies do business at those airports, with the type of business in parentheses where needed:

#### **Quonset State Airport**

Landings at Quonset (hangars)

Quonset Air Museum

Sentinel Limousine

#### **North Central State Airport**

Air Ventures (flight school)

Boston Skydiving

New England Aviation (aircraft maintenance/repair)

North Central Flight Center (flight school)

RI Aviation (hangars, aircraft maintenance/repair)

TAS Aircraft Sales

#### **Newport State Airport**

Bird's Eye View Helicopters

Chris Aircraft (aircraft maintenance/repair)

Newport Aviation

Newport Hangars

Skydive Newport

#### **Westerly State Airport**

Dooney Aviation (aeronautical services)

New England Airlines

North American Hangars

Reeves Air (aircraft maintenance/repair)

Simmons Aviation (aircraft sales, charters, Warbird Flight Experience, banner towing)

#### **Block Island State Airport**

Bethany's Airport Diner

Block Island Tourism

New England Airlines

Resort Air (charters)

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