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National Perspectives

End of the Runway: New Homes Are Rising

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AS many cities continue to sprawl, especially in the West, airports that once seemed far-flung and isolated are suddenly in the middle of the action. The suburbs and exurbs have simply grown out to meet them, making airport land especially appealing to developers who are always on the lookout for new places to build.

Over the last decade, in fact, developers have been buying up more and more airport properties around the country and putting up homes and, in some cases, commercial buildings in their place. The airport owners have been more than willing to accommodate them, finding it far more profitable to sell their land than to lease it to pilots.

Data provided by the Federal Aviation Administration seems to illustrate this trend: In 2004, the most recent year for which information is available, there were 5,280 public-use airports, down from 5,474 in 1994. Most of the property was privately owned and served smaller general aviation planes and not commercial jets. (The [F.A.A.](#) doesn't keep track, however, of what happens to an airport after it is closes.)

"There are so few large unbuilt parcels left out there that developers now have to look at redevelopment opportunities," said Debra Bassert, assistant staff vice president of land use policy with the National Association of Home Builders. "This means taking a piece of land that's sitting idle, that has something on it already, and doing something different with it."

Airport land is about as raw as developed land can be, which generally makes it good for building. It is almost always board flat and cleared of trees, and it is usually well-drained. The average airport is typically a few hundred acres, but some airports are much bigger, and they are always near major highways.

Redeveloping airport land, while lucrative for developers and owners, can also benefit local communities.

The property taxes generated by the homes and businesses planned on the site of the former Evergreen Airport in Vancouver, Wash., will allow the city to put up new roads and pay for other municipal services, said Gerald Baugh, Vancouver's manager of business development. "If it does what we think it's going to do, I think it will be a positive thing for the town," he said.

The \$160 million project, which was approved by the City Council last month, calls for Opus Northwest of Minneapolis to build 135 houses and town homes, priced at \$250,000 to \$350,000, which is higher than the city's average home price of \$203,000. In addition, there will be retail, office, and hotel space on the 50-acre site, which was "in the middle of nowhere" 20 years ago, according to Mr. Baugh. The owners of the airport had said they could no longer afford to keep it open.

Also last month, Burlington, Conn., gave its approval for a local developer, Brycorp, to build 11 houses on a 19-acre parcel located at the end of the former runway at Mountain Meadows Airport. The homes, which will sell for around \$400,000, will be restricted to those age 55 and over, meaning residents are unlikely to be adding children to the school system.

"It's all taxes and no kids, so it was good for the town," said Richard Miller, the former owner, who ran into opposition from a group of pilots that wanted the airport to stay open. The 20 or so pilots have since relocated

to three other airports.

In Madison, Conn., meanwhile, LeylandAlliance of Tuxedo, N.Y., is one state permit away from building 127 units of detached houses, town houses and condominiums on the site of the 41-acre Griswold Airport, which was founded next to Long Island Sound in the 1930's. The homes, ranging from 1,000 to 3,500 square feet, will also be restricted to those 55 and over.

Though single-engine planes and ultralight aircraft still fly out of Griswold, the airport may have outlived its usefulness, said Steve Maun, president of LeylandAlliance. "It's not equipped for the next generation of fliers," he said, "and it's been very economically difficult to sustain." The private airport, owned by MaryAnn Griswold, has two runways — one paved and one grass.

Developing on a public-owned airport, though, can be more difficult. The F.A.A. needs to approve such sales, because these airports receive government funds, and it typically likes them to stay open to keep traffic flowing smoothly.

Yet there have been exceptions. In August, the F.A.A. agreed to close Rialto Airport, a two-landing-strip facility near San Bernardino, Calif., so it could be sold to developers. Although it is still in use, the airport, situated next to Interstate 210, a new freeway, will eventually have 2,500 units of detached houses and town houses on its 450 acres, according to Greg Lantz, Rialto's economic development manager. Prices for the houses have not yet been set.

Mr. Lantz said the decision to close the airport was largely an economic one; it had been losing \$500,000 a year as fewer flights — half of them by hobbyist pilots in small planes, and the other half by law-enforcement officers in helicopters — took off and landed. Fewer new pilots and a surplus of nearby airports contributed to the airport's demise. Most pilots will now use San Bernardino International Airport, five miles to the east, Mr. Lantz said.

"It's not that our airport was subpar, but it didn't have all the amenities that people expect in a modern airport," he said. "And people in our community said, 'We would rather have you spending money to fix potholes.' "

The former [Robert Mueller](#) Municipal Airport in Austin, Tex., another publicly owned facility, will also soon trade its runways for homes.

Because Mueller was too small for the air traffic it was getting, and runway expansion would have been difficult in the densely settled area, the city closed the 711-acre site in May 1999, when commercial jets and private planes were rerouted to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, a larger facility built on the site of a former Air Force base seven miles away.

Beginning in mid-2007, the Catellus Development Corporation, the project's developer, will build 4,600 homes, including single-family and multifamily units, half for owners and half for renters, priced at \$130,000 to \$550,000.

Already, medical facilities grace the property, which will eventually include four million square feet of office space, 550,000 square feet of retail space and 140 acres of parks.

The control tower and a hangar, saved from demolition, will end up in two of the parks, as a way to acknowledge the site's previous tenant, according to Greg Weaver, a senior vice president at Catellus. "You get a piece of land on which you get to create a new community from scratch, that's usually located in the heart of the city," he said. "It's like filling the hole in the doughnut."

Yet filling that hole may not always be popular with general aviation pilots, who are displaced when airports

close. In fact, the number of private planes is increasing, while the number of airports is decreasing. That can create congestion by pushing general aviation planes into public airports, which have to accept them by law, said Bill Dunn, vice president of airports for the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. The group represents two-thirds of all licensed pilots.

The association, which fights to keep airports open, has had some recent successes: Albert Whitted Municipal Airport in St. Petersburg, Fla.; Reid-Hillview Airport in San Jose, Calif., and Buchanan Field Airport in Concord, Calif., where Shappell Industries, a developer, wanted to build 6,000 homes.

One of the first airport redevelopments, in 2001, is the former Stapleton International Airport in Denver — replaced by the Denver International Airport — where a huge mixed-use project will add 12,000 housing units, including detached houses, town houses and lofts, to a 4,700-acre site by 2020.

Mike King, a lawyer who moved to Stapleton from Lynncroft, N.J., in 2004, now lives in a 3,000-square-foot four-bedroom, three-bath house, one of the first to be built in the development. His commute to Denver's downtown is just 15 minutes.

As president of Stapleton United Neighbors, Mr. King says he gets to influence how future housing developments in Stapleton will look.

Mr. King also says he is glad that blight did not claim the abandoned airport. "That would have been a nasty greeting," he said, "for people who are coming in from out of town."