

## **Q & A on The Plans for Longer Runways at Craig**

*Gerald Robichaud is a resident of Arlington and a 38 year professional pilot, having spent the first 21 of those years in the Navy & Coast Guard, followed by 17 1/2 years flying for Northwest Airlines. During 10 years of his military career he was an Aviation Safety Officer, trained in formulating and implementing safety policy as well as in conducting aircraft accident investigations. Mr. Robichaud addresses some of the most common questions and misconceptions about the JAA's plans to expand the runways at Craig Municipal Airport.*

Q. Why isn't a longer runway safer?

A. More runway is ALWAYS desirable. The question any funding authority has to ask is "when is it enough"? Essentially, that answer comes from the FAA and the aircraft builders who certify each aircraft built for sale. Through exhaustive design and testing they determine the performance capability of the aircraft and produce volumes of performance data, which, among other things tells pilots how much runway he or she needs to takeoff or land at a certain weight, temperature, wind condition and runway condition (i.e., rain, snow, etc.). It is the responsibility and duty of the pilot in command to adhere to those criteria and only operate his/her aircraft under legal conditions. Now, in a perfect world where everything came free we would build all airports with 20,000-foot runways even if we only needed 5,000 feet to be safe and legal. But, if you look at the most recent runways built at major airports in the United States at MEM, MSP and SEA, which were all built for international MD-11 and 747 operations, you will see that they are 11,100, 11,000 and 11,900 feet. These are for aircraft that are, at times, taking off at more than 900,000 pounds and flying non-stop to Tokyo and China. If a longer runway is a safer runway then why are the airlines and the FAA risking the lives of 400 passengers and a \$175 million airplane every time a 747 takes off on one of these puny runways? Why aren't they 15,000 or 20,000 feet long?

Q. The JAA says that since their commitment in 2001 not to come back again and request an extension of the Craig runways, "new technology" has emerged which makes that statement (to use a Nixon White House phrase), "inoperative"? Do you know of any new technology in the last six years that changes the aviation landscape for Craig?

A. The short answer is NO. Certainly there have been some advances in aircraft design with the 777, A-380 and the soon-to-be-seen 787, but I don't see them coming to JIA, much less Craig. Improvements in

business jets have been incremental, not revolutionary. Certainly not something that was unforeseen in 2001. Perhaps the one "new technology" that they would like to see at Craig is the so called VLJ (very light jet) which half a dozen manufacturers are bringing to the market. I believe that all or virtually all of them will be certified to operate into airports with a 4,000 foot runway. Now, whether their owners and insurance companies want to do that is another story. They may not be willing to pay what it takes to get experienced and well qualified pilots who can routinely handle such operations and instead hire inexperienced pilots for less money and simply "pad" the minimums that they can operate under. (i.e. minimum 5,000 foot runway, no landing with ceilings below 200 feet, etc.) I saw this routinely in my airline job where we would fly a 40 year old DC-9 on a Category II ILS down to 100 feet while regional jets with CAT III autoland were diverting to other airports because the airline chose not to train the pilots to do CAT II or the CAT III autoland. So perhaps JAA wants to attract the NETJETS/FLEXJETS/VLJ operators of the world to Craig, but those folks want to hire low time, less costly pilots and not use the aircraft's capability to land on a 4,000 foot runway. Should we be subsidizing such people's cheapness with our tax dollars?

Q. The JAA says that even if bigger aircraft use Craig, they will be quieter. Is that true?

A. It is true that the newer aircraft are quieter than older ones. That was brought about by government regulations, prompted mostly by the Europeans. So you could have a 40,000 pound jet taking off making less noise than a 25,000 pound jet. However, JAA assumes that everyone is going to have a new jet. I don't think so. An aircraft is a big investment. My previous airline is still operating DC-9s that were built in the mid-late 60s and 25-35 year old aircraft are common all over the commercial airline world. The same is true of business aircraft. Once you build 6,000-foot runways and larger, heavier and faster aircraft can use Craig, they will and you can't legally pick and choose which ones. So you will get the noisy ones along with the quieter, Stage III aircraft.

Q. You talked about longer not necessarily being appreciably safer. Can you elaborate on that with some other examples?

A. I'll give you 3 examples of airports in heavy commercial use everyday which are in the range of runway length that JAA wants to make Craig.

1. Midway, Chicago: in the 50's and early 60's the busiest airport in the world. Has runways between 5,100 feet to 6,500 feet. No overruns, surrounded by apartments and houses. Used by DC-9, 737, A320 and 757 aircraft.

2. Washington National. The favorite of our Congress for easy accessibility. Runways are 4900-, 5200- and 6869-feet-long. Water at most ends. Also favored by DC-9, 737, A320 and 757.

3. White Plains, NY. Used by most of the major corporations in NYC. Served by NWA DC-9. Runways are 4450- and 6548-feet-long with steep slopes on all ends.

All of these airports are deemed safe by the FAA, the airlines who operate there and by hundreds of the highest paid executives and biggest politicians in America. If a 757 can operate out of Midway or Washington National then why do we need that length runway at Craig for much smaller corporate and private aircraft?

Q. JAA says that as a matter of civic pride that Jacksonville cannot have this little runt airport at Craig when Palatka has one with longer runways. How do you respond to that?

A. Apples and oranges. Does Palatka have a JIA, a Cecil Field or a Herlong airport? Palatka has one airport, probably a hand-me-down from WWII military days, like Craig is. It just happens to have longer runways. But Craig was not built to be THE airport in Jacksonville. We just got lucky and got an airport handed to us after WWII way out east of town (before the "bridge to nowhere" was built )and so we had a nice, quiet little private field where folks could get instruction or go joy riding and do the occasional business trip out of. And thousands of residences and businesses grew up all over Arlington, not minding having this little airport in their community. As long as it retains that character I think the airport and its neighbors will get along well for years to come. It was never meant to be the commercial or business airport for Jacksonville. We have JIA for that and Cecil if we want to bring some really big aircraft in occasionally.

Q. Isn't it important to have the longest runway possible so that if an aircraft loses an engine on takeoff the pilot can land right away?

A. That is a popular misconception among non-pilots.....that if you lose an engine right after takeoff you will just come back down and land the airplane on the remaining runway. In fact, the only aircraft that need to land immediately after an engine failure are those with only one engine to start with. If you lose your one and only engine then you've suddenly become a glider pilot, like it or not, and single engine pilots should always have their eye out for good potential landing spots whether it's on takeoff, at 1,000 feet or 10,000 feet. But for everyone else the proper thing to do is to continue flying. In fact, on every takeoff there is a point referred to as Vee-One (sometimes called the Go-No-Go point)

where the aircraft has accelerated to a speed where it is almost ready to fly and it is more safe to continue the takeoff than try to stop. This occurs even before you've left the ground. So if you have an engine failure right at Vee-one you will keep rolling and takeoff at a slightly shallower angle. Experienced and well trained pilots know this and do not try to slam the aircraft back on the ground. If an engine fails they add power to the remaining engine(s), climb out (slower than usual) attain a safe altitude, make a shallow turn and come back for a normal approach and landing, using all of the available runway. Vee-one is also calculated so that if the engine failure occurs just before Vee-one, the pilot has enough runway remaining to stay on the ground and stop on the runway. Here is where an overrun provides an extra safety margin. If you have 500 feet of overrun, chances are much better that the high speed abort will be successful and result in no damage to the aircraft or occupants.