

Airport of the Month - ORR, ORB

By Tom Foster



It's cold and dark. A few snow flurries are in the air. Thanks to the miracle of GPS, the pilot has made it to the last stop and taxis up to the self-service fueling system. There is another trip tomorrow. It would be nice to just go home, but fueling now will make life easier in the morning. Too bad the dispenser isn't working. After turning the pump handle up and down half a dozen times, using a different credit card and a trying a few of the magic words reserved for such occasions; the frustrated aviator puts the airplane away and leaves a message for the airport manager expressing some displeasure with the situation.

That scenario is why Orr Regional Airport has a new fueling system. The old one was unreliable and pilots were opting to buy fuel someplace else instead of Orr. Now there's two tanks with 5000 gallons each of aviation gas and jet fuel. Each tank has a hose reel that retracts with the touch of a button and the credit card reader is new too. A light is conveniently placed on one side to eliminated the need to fumble with a flash light when it is dark.

Orr's old system was a strange unit with both products stored in a divided tank. That system replaced some underground tanks in the 1990s when environmental issues of buried fuel

were becoming a problem. There used to be a "Minnesota Department of Aeronautics" that has since been folded into the "Minnesota Department of Transportation." The old Department of Aeronautics could own airports and Orr was one of them. In 1972 the state decided to transform Orr from a landing strip to a full-fledged airport which included paving the runway and installing a non-directional beacon. A building was constructed that included an arrival/departure area, equipment storage garage and an apartment for the airport manager. A fueling system was installed with underground tanks. That was before credit card readers became ubiquitous and the theory was the onsite manager would make services available 24/7 assuming the individual chosen for the job wasn't interested in a regular sleeping schedule. Automation is so much better.

Other cities thought the state should build an airport for them too. That could get expensive, so legislation was enacted that said Minnesota would not own airports and ownership of the airport was transferred to the city of Orr in 1988 with the understanding that improvements would be funded by state and federal grants. A project was completed in 1991 that brought the Orr Regional Airport to its current configuration.



The new Fueling System at Orr.

Angela Holm from Bollig supplied the pictures.



Orr Regional Airport Aerial View

A big piece of that was funded by the Iron Range Resources and Redevelopment Board (aka IRRRB or "I triple R B") who also helped fund the new fueling system. IRRRB funds are derived from taxes on the mining operations in northeast Minnesota. The goal is reinvestment to promote economic development and improved quality of life. Airports certainly do that.

Underground fuel storage for airports used to be normal. Buried tanks were a much lower fire hazard than above ground, and the problems with condensation were fewer. In the 1980s there was an epidemic of leaking tanks. Elaborate

leak detection and prevention systems have solved the problem, but where there's the room to meet the separation criteria for fire prevention airports favor above ground systems. Also, modern storage tanks like the ones at Orr have better fireproofing than the previous iterations.

William Orr was the post master in 1907 when the city was incorporated. Mr. Orr also owned a hotel, mercantile, and social hall. Lumber jacks working the woods around town could get mail, a place to sleep, food, supplies and entertainment all at one stop. In the twenty first century lumbering is still important, but Orr has become the center of a recreation area that's both interesting and unique. An airport and reliable fueling are essential to the town's success.

Besides the new fueling system, Orr's airport has a four thousand foot long paved and lighted runway with a full instrument approach now powered by GPS. There is a generous aircraft parking area with plenty of tiedown spaces. For permanent tenants, the city has a good selection of hangar sites for lease and some city owned "Tee Hangars." A large multiple plane hangar is also available for short or long term use. Best of all, based or transient users can now depend on getting fuel day or night at the Orr Regional Airport.