

# TUOLUMNE COUNTY AIRPORTS

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*Columbia and Pine Mountain Lake*

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June 28, 2010

Honorable Eric L. DuTemple, Presiding Judge  
Department 1  
41 West Yaney Avenue  
Sonora, CA 95370

Subject: Airports Department Response to the 2009-2010 Grand Jury Report

This letter provides you with a detailed response to the findings and recommendations included in the 2009- 2010 Grand Jury Report on the Tuolumne County Airports Department. Included are my response to eight findings and five recommendations.

## Response to Findings

#1 Finding – All previous Grand Jury Findings and Recommendations have been met.

Response – Agree – No response required.

#2 Finding – Work and time management is very important for all county airport staff. Work must be, and appears to be, scheduled in such a way that priority work is accomplished first and as soon as possible.

Response – Agree – The airport staff fully understands which work is a priority and addresses this work as quickly as possible.

#3 Finding - Noise complaints continue to be a problem at both airports...

Response – Agree – The Airports Department attempts to obtain information about the aircraft causing the noise problem so the pilot can be contacted. Unfortunately, most of the time the caller cannot provide enough detail to allow the Airports Department staff to identify the pilot. Also, often times the aircraft may not be based at either Columbia or Pine Mountain Lake Airport, making it extremely difficult to contact the pilot. The noise sensitive areas map is posted on the Airports Department website, in the window of both the Airports Administration office and

Bald Eagle Aviation, and in the window of the Pine Mountain Lake Airport pilots lounge. The noise sensitive areas are also published in the FAA Facility Directory and many airport information manuals. Each Manager's Approach includes a brief reminder of our noise sensitive areas. It should be noted that the number of noise complaints has decreased over the past few years.

#4 Finding – State aid for this year has been suspended...

Response – Agree – Each of the Tuolumne County Airports has received an Annual Credit Grant in the amount of \$10,000 from the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics. This money is generated through State aviation fuel taxes. It is not known how long we have been receiving these grants, however we have received grants each and every year since at least 2000. Last year, the State of California, due to financial difficulties, passed a law that suspended the payment of the Annual Credit Grant to all small California airports. As a result, the Tuolumne County Airports Department did not receive an anticipated income of \$20,000 (\$10,000 for each airport) which is a significant part of the Airports Department budget.

#5 Finding – The grass runway at Columbia is a unique feature of public airports...

Response – Agree – The grass runway at Columbia Airport is one of only two publicly accessible grass runways in California, the other being Frazier Airpark near Hollister. The grass runway and our fly-in-only campground attract numerous pilots to Columbia Airport. Numerous aircraft type groups and aviation organizations come to Columbia Airport to hold their annual gatherings. The grass runway certainly brings people and revenue to Columbia Airport and Tuolumne County.

#6 Finding – The deer fence at PML, recommended by the Wildlife Services, has made PML much safer...

Response – Agree – The deer fence is designed to change the migration route of the deer so they cross the runway at either end of the deer fence, thus reducing the number of deer on the western 2/3's of the runway. The fence appears to be working as US Wildlife Services indicated and the number of deer strikes has been reduced significantly.

#7 Finding – While there are no scheduled inspections of the hangars at either airport there are random inspections...

Response – Agree – Random inspections occur when we test the heat detectors in the hangars, when hangar maintenance is performed, when

hangar are left open, and when a concern is expressed to the Airports Department.

- #8 Finding – While there is no precision approach...at either airport, there are non-precision GPS approaches.

Response – Agree – Precision approaches allow aircraft to land with lower visibility than non-precision approaches. Only the FAA can establish precision approaches and these approaches are expensive to set up. Currently we have non-precision approaches into both Pine Mountain Lake and Columbia Airports. As technology improves, the cost of equipment decreases, and after higher priority airports receive precision approaches, the Tuolumne County Airports should receive precision approaches.

#### Response to Recommendations

- #1 Recommendation – For Finding 1, no recommendation is needed.

Response – Agree – The Airports Department will continue to quickly address any future Grand Jury recommendations.

- #2 Recommendation – For Finding 2, consideration should be given to hiring additional staff, either part time or full time for maintenance of facilities. Volunteers may and should also be considered for some of the maintenance work, if appropriate.

Response – The current Airports Department budget and financial condition of the County has resulted in a reduction in the staffing of the Airports Department. Two long term employees took early retirement. The Senior Airports Technician position is being filled as an Airports Technician and the Department Support Technician is only being replaced with a part time position. Additionally, the County has eliminated the Airports Department and made it a division of the Public Works Department. The Airports Director became a Deputy Director of Operations within the Department of Public Works and that job includes the responsibility of managing the Columbia Equipment Shop, the County Radio Communications Coordinator, and developing the new Fleet Services Division which will eventually perform all of the maintenance on most County vehicles and equipment. These changes will actually reduce the staffing at the airports, not increase the staffing.

The Airports Department has utilized volunteers for many tasks over the past several years with the biggest volunteer effort coming during the Annual Father's Day Fly-In. At Columbia Airport, the Tuolumne County Aeronautical Association had contributed significantly to the maintenance

of the airport with their most recent contribution being the donation of a new Columbia Airport sign located over the top of the airport lobby. The residents at Pine Mountain Lake Airport have also been very supportive of the airport. Recently they funded the filling of the asphalt cracks and also raised a significant amount of money for future airport repairs.

### Additional Explanations/Observations

**General** – The FAA sent Tuolumne County a letter in August of 2007, that stated that the Pine Mountain Lake Airport could not satisfy two Grant Assurances associated with FAA Airport Improvement Program Grants. Therefore, the airport was ineligible for FAA funding. The FAA's current policy written in their "FAA Airport Compliance Manual" issued in September, 2009 says that residential airparks are not compatible with federally funded airports and therefore not eligible for Airport Improvement Program funding. The Airports Department has submitted a written response to this but has received no reply. It would be difficult for Tuolumne County to contest the policy of the FAA.

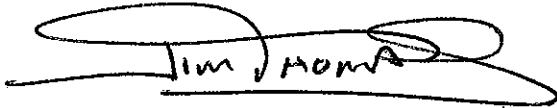
**Aircraft Noise** – Aircraft, once in the air, fall under the regulations of the FAA not the County. Each aircraft is different and each pilot's ability and safety margin vary. Aircraft noise is a function of both the aircraft design and the pilot's procedure. The FAA regulates aircraft design and pilot training. For years, the Airports Department has been working to raise local pilot awareness on the impact of their aircraft's noise on people on the ground. It is an ongoing effort. The long term solution to this is for the FAA and aircraft manufacturers to lower the amount of noise produced by aircraft. Until this happens, raising pilot's awareness of noise issues will be an ongoing effort of the Airports Department.

**More Accurate GPS Approaches** – Obtaining precision approaches to both the Tuolumne County Airports will enhance the safety and usability of our airports by providing safer landings at the airports during bad weather. However, Tuolumne is generally blessed with excellent flying weather and the number of aircraft operations per year is rather low. For these reasons, the FAA is focusing their efforts on putting precisions in at more active airports located in areas of the country that do not have the excellent weather conditions we have in Tuolumne County. The Airports Department has placed both our airports on the FAA list to receive the needed obstruction survey which is an early requirement in the process of obtaining a precision approach. The survey is costly and the FAA performs the surveys based on a priority list which has all commercial

service airports at the top of the list. Neither of the Tuolumne County Airports have commercial service.

I hope this response to the 2009-2010 Grand Jury Report answers all the questions regarding the Pine Mountain Lake and Columbia Airports. If any clarification is needed I would be happy to provide all additional information you may require.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jim Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a large, loopy, horizontal oval shape.

Jim Thomas

Cc: Maureen Frank, Deputy County Administrator  
Peter Rei, Director of Public Works