


MiamiHerald.com 

Posted on Wed, Oct. 17, 2007

Close calls plague small corporate airport

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Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport, the corporate aviation hub nestled amid businesses and residences, holds one of the nation's most troubling safety records.

In the past 40 months, eight people have died in crashes shortly after takeoff from the city-run airport, and several close calls barely averted catastrophe on the ground.

The most recent: a 43-year-old cargo plane that crashed near Interstate 95 and Cypress Creek Road on Sept. 21, stunning Friday afternoon commuters and leaving the bloodied pilot a miracle survivor.

Since 2003, 29 planes have crashed either flying from or to FXE, as it is known, a Miami Herald review of National Transportation Safety Board records found.

Yet it is lapses on the ground that consistently rank the airport among the nation's most dangerous, federal records show.

Fort Lauderdale Executive had more runway incursions -- planes coming too close to each other or a ground vehicle -- than any other airport in the country from 2001 to 2004, Federal Aviation Administration records show. Even with recent improvements, it still ranks in the top 10 nationally.

In that time, it also led the United States in "surface incidents" -- cases that don't typically involve an aircraft in potential conflict, but include unauthorized aircraft crossing an empty runway, for instance. FXE had 67 such incidents -- more than triple the combined number at airports in Miami, Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Pembroke Pines and Opa-locka.

While none of the runway mishaps resulted in death, experts liken them to running a red light: You may go unharmed this time, but maybe not next time. Reducing the risks of runway incursions and collisions nationwide is a top FAA priority.

TOWER BLIND SPOT

Compounding matters: FXE's control tower is 15 years past its 20-year design life, and still some six years from being replaced, as the FAA has only recently made it a top priority.

The tower -- on the airport's southern side, tucked between hangars and operations buildings -- is only a few stories tall and can barely be seen over adjacent buildings. It operates with a blind spot that likely was a factor in the high rate of ground problems.

"It's very difficult for the tower to see the aircraft moving on the taxiway on the southeast corner of the airport," said Paul Kramer, a pilot and flight instructor who has been a tenant since 1971.

Airport manager Clara Bennett declined to be interviewed. Asked about the recent accidents and long-standing runway problems, Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jim Naugle said: "I knew nothing about this."

The FAA and pilots like Kramer say the aviation community has put a major focus on reducing the number of runway incidents.

"It's not that there is a problem and they are not addressing it," said Kramer, who uses the airport almost every day. "There is a problem and they are aware of it, and they are trying to stop it."

The FAA said the reform effort -- including training for pilots, controllers and airport drivers; annual safety assessments; and new signage and lighting -- has paid off. Runway incursions dropped from 15 in 2001 to two in 2005.

"Our success is clear," FAA spokeswoman Kathleen Bergen wrote to The Miami Herald.

Yet the number rose to three last year and five so far this year, prompting the FAA to focus, again, on curtailing the problem. Many airports report zero yearly incursions.

Ted Lawson, a city spokesman, said FXE is presently ranked ninth in the number of runway incursions, tying it with 12 other airports.

Meanwhile, problems in the air continue.

Of the 29 accidents since 2003 in which planes had departed from or were en route to FXE, nine occurred within 20 minutes of takeoff, killing eight and seriously injuring six. Though a handful of the 29 crashes occurred hundreds of miles away, Fort Lauderdale Executive Airport has had more than its share of close calls.

In the same period, there were 10 accidents of planes coming from or headed to North Perry Airport, a Pembroke Pines general aviation facility. One person was killed in a crash after takeoff.

Opa-locka Executive Airport figured in 13 such accidents. None involved fatalities after takeoff, though there was one noteworthy close call in December 2004 when a behemoth cargo plane splash-landed in Maule Lake not far from Aventura Mall.

Planes taking off from FXE have crashed in a North Lauderdale park, a Lake Worth driving range and the Atlantic Ocean, and onto a residential street in Fort Lauderdale, a dirt road in the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge near Parkland, a Lauderdale auto shop, and most recently, the grassy swale of I-95.

On Aug. 1, a young pilot brought his Piper Aerostar down on Cypress Creek Road and skidded a few blocks, barely missing a McDonald's.

The crashes don't faze Andrea Vitale, 49, who has lived in the nearby Coral Ridge Isles community for more than two decades. "We always attribute it to pilot or mechanical error," she said. "We never think it's the airport's fault."

Most FXE-related crashes were the result of pilot error, mechanical breakdowns, shoddy maintenance

-- or some combination of the three, NTSB reports show.

Experts say such breakdowns do not directly reflect on an airport. But indirectly they do, reflecting upon the safety record and practices of entities operating there.

Just one minute after takeoff from FXE on June 13, 2005, a DC-3S cargo plane crash-landed in Coral Ridge Isles.

The plane, on its way to deliver six slabs of granite to the Bahamas, belly flopped before hitting palm trees, cars and a home. Then it exploded, shaking houses blocks from the crash scene in the 1700 block of Northeast 56th Street. The pilot, co-pilot and passenger escaped with serious injuries in a crash linked to inadequate maintenance.

Five months earlier, a pilot died when he crashed his Cirrus SR-22 single-engine plane into a Coconut Creek home in the Centura Parc development shortly after takeoff.

A mother and her 2-year-old daughter were watching cartoons when they heard a loud noise overhead. They ran outside, seconds before the plane plowed into their roof, causing a series of explosions. Neither was hurt.

In another deadly crash June 23, 2004, 10 employees at a Fort Lauderdale auto body shop barely escaped injury when a Piper operated by the Pompano Senior Squadron Flying Club slammed into their roof and came to a crashing halt on a Lamborghini -- killing two and seriously injuring a third. The 1977 four-seater took off from FXE two minutes earlier.

Last month, Robert Robertson barely had time to lift his twin-engine Beech 18 off the ground when trouble began.

Witnesses saw the plane "wagging" from side to side before clipping a building with its wing, jumping a chain-link fence and landing on a swale on the southbound lanes of I-95, just south of Cypress Creek Road. Had Robertson landed just a few yards away into oncoming traffic, there would have been more injuries -- and likely deaths.

RUNWAY MISHAPS

On the ground, Fort Lauderdale Executive led nearly 500 FAA-towered airports nationwide in runway mishaps and surface incidents from 2001 to 2004. The FAA pulled more recent numbers for FXE and said it will release an updated national report soon.

FXE's rate of runway incursions in most of those years was well above any other Florida airport, and higher than most in the nation. In 2001, it was roughly 10 times higher than Miami International Airport's and nine times higher than Fort Lauderdale-Hollywood International Airport's. Even as the rate improved, it remained well above average.

The FAA defines runway incursions as "any occurrence in the airport runway environment involving an aircraft, vehicle, person, or object on the ground that creates a collision hazard or results in a loss of required separation with an aircraft taking off, intending to take off, landing or intending to land."

More than one-third of U.S. airports reported zero incursions in the four years. FXE had 33 -- matching the combined total of international airports in Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, and dwarfing every other airport in the state.

With 10 since 2005, FXE has 43 incursions since 2001. Bergen of the FAA said 30 "had no chance of collision" and that 11 involved cases where pilots had "ample time to avoid a potential collision."

"Only two were categorized as having significant potential for collision," she wrote.

She said most runway mishaps involved vehicle drivers and pilots failing to comply with air-traffic control instructions, failing to communicate with air traffic or losing situational awareness.

"It's not to be dismissed lightly, because it's serious," Kramer said. "Every time you have one of those, you are one incursion closer to a bad one."

Kramer was injured in a 2004 crash in Lake Worth 20 minutes after leaving FXE, after a loss of engine power for "undetermined reasons."

Knowing he lacked time to safely land at an airport, Kramer found the nearest open space: a driving range. "I had to make a decision, and I decided that was the place to put it down," he said.

The plane flipped after crashing into a mound of earth. It was totaled, and Kramer spent six months recovering from a fractured vertebra and cracked neck.

A month shy of his 73rd birthday, Kramer staunchly defends the airport as committed to improving safety. "When you start to see the statistics, they immediately take action," he said.

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