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Local airport in 'unique' situation

By NEIL YOUNG/*The Daily News*

BULLHEAD CITY - "Most people don't know and understand how this all works. It kind of mystifies everybody," said David Gaines, Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport director.

Gaines was referring to the unique role the airport plays in the community. It's self-supporting and a government unto itself. Mohave County owns the airport and the Mohave County Airport Authority operates it.

"(Airports are) created as non-profit corporations, but under state law, as determined by the state attorney general, we are instrumentalities of the state and agents for whomever owns the airport, whether it's a city or a county," Gaines said. "So, we have to have open meeting law. We are treated just as government. We are government. We have the authority to adopt ordinances and enforce those ordinances. So we have the police powers of municipalities."

Unlike municipalities, there's one thing they can't do.

"We don't have the ability to tax. The only way we can raise revenue is through our businesses," Gaines said, "and it is a very positive thing to be able to go to the citizens of Mohave County, and Bullhead City and other communities who use this airport, (and tell them) they don't spend one red cent of general revenue on the operation of the airport. It is 100 percent financially self-supporting. We get no money from the county, we get no money from the cities surrounding the airport and the only state revenue we get is matching money for grants and that comes from aviation taxes."

Not all airports are self-supporting, Gaines said. Some receive tax money from cities or counties.

A major source of revenue for Laughlin/Bullhead airport is the land it leases on a long-term basis to retailers and restaurants.

"You cannot use airport property for non-aviation reasons, unless through agreement," Gaines said. "The first thing you have to do is demonstrate it's not useful for aviation purposes, which it's not. That was the reason for relocating the airfield up on the side of the hill."

In exchange for getting permission from the Federal Aviation Administration to develop the land for non-aviation purposes, any revenue generated from that commercial activity must be returned to the airport to pay for its operations.

The city also benefits from the arrangement. "The commercial development creates sales tax revenue for the city," Gaines said.

"It's always of great concern to make sure that as we, as a government entity, try to administer these facilities in the best interest of the public who owns the airport (and) to be as efficient as we possibly can in its marketing, in its development, and in its care," he said.

Laughlin/Bullhead airport has become a model for other airports that want to develop land that cannot be used for aeronautical purposes, Gaines said. "It's fairly unique across the country to have this kind of a situation."