

Cooma a Centre for Recreational Flying

Recreational flying is a growing industry. It is now within the reach of many more people, in terms of cost of planes and training. There are now over 7,000 members of Recreational Aviation Australia. With its headquarters in Canberra, it looks after the interests of recreational fliers across Australia.

Unfortunately there is a growing trend for small airfield closures around Australia. Larger commercial airports are becoming more focused on passenger and freight services with the consequence that these airports are becoming too expensive for recreational pilots. Cooma in the Snowy Mountains is looking to take advantage of this situation.

With the support of the local Business Enterprise Centre and Cooma-Monaro Shire Council, Michael and Elisabeth Apps, the owners of Cooma's local airfield Polo Flat, have been investigating a proposal for the development of Cooma Polo Flat Airpark.

Polo Flat airfield is situated in Cooma's industrial area adjacent to the township. Its aviation history dates back to the 1920s when Kingsford Smith landed his plane in Polo Flat.

Elisabeth Apps spoke of the motivation of her and husband Michael to maintain an operational airfield in Cooma. She said, "I hoped that with other recreational pilot investors joining us in the Airpark proposal, it would ensure that the airfield was maintained and retained for the future long past when we may not be involved." She added, "people are clearly interested to ensure such a facility is sustained, so we are very confident of gaining investors but even if that is not the case we intend to proceed."

In 1998 Michael and Elisabeth Apps purchased the airfield and surrounding industrial land. They established a flying school in 2003, the Snowy Aviation Academy that has trained over 60 recreational pilots. Over the past two years there has been a considerable increase in the clients and the flying school now has five instructors and operates two training aircraft with a third on order. Several recreational pilots have built kit planes on the site and an increasing number of pilots now hangar their planes at the airfield.

The historic Snowy Authority hangers and terminal building were restored and are still used. Elisabeth Apps told us, "The terminal building has been turned into an Office, Training Room and other facilities." With the increased demand the proposed development of an Airpark to expand the facilities could attract even more pilots and aircraft from Canberra and Sydney.

Councillor Norton told us, "There is considerable advantage in costs to have Canberra recreational pilots move their planes to Cooma. 20 years ago the Canberra Gliding Club faced closure due to the inability to find a suitable site in the ACT for their activities. They moved to Bunyan, just 10 Kms north of Cooma and have hangars and overnight accommodation at the site.

BEC Manager Mr Mercer said, “If we can develop the airfield into an Airpark with associated facilities, we then have the foundation for a new recreational aviation industry for Cooma. There is potential for recreational plane construction, repairs and maintenance that could be developed through our existing local fabrication and engineering industries.”

Council’s Economic Development Manager Caroline Fox advised, “Recreational plane kit import and distribution businesses are potential users of industrial plots within the Airpark. Our local tourism and hospitality industry will benefit with increased accommodation and hospitality needs from pilots and those who are in Cooma for training. “

This project is yet another example of the team development approach that Cooma uses to assist new business and industry development. In the past the BEC, Council and others in the community have worked together to develop industry and business in initiatives.