



ASH DANIEL

## Long viewed as a bedroom community, Chesterfield is now one of the state's biggest job generators

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

In the mid-1990s, Brad Bradley had big dreams for the business his father, Dempsey, founded in 1969. Bradley Mechanical got its start supplying heating and air conditioning systems on the commercial market, primarily to churches and schools. But the younger Bradley saw an opportunity to grow by shifting the focus to residential homes.

Over the next two decades, as the county's residential population exploded, so did Bradley Mechanical, which broadened its services beyond traditional HVAC installation. The company added electrical services and a home performance division that provides air quality and energy efficiency testing and solutions. Earlier this year, it moved into a new building near the Chesterfield County Airport, doubling the size of its old warehouse space. Since January, Bradley has hired 11 new employees to handle the growth.

"We just outgrew the space," Bradley says, adding that the new 20,000-square-foot building has room for additional expansion. "We added [workers] in the plumbing division, the electrical division. We added a maintenance tech in the service department. We added an install crew."

Bradley says a focus on quality and well-trained workers has allowed the company, now up to 60 employees, to withstand the whims of the local

economy and home-building market. During the height of the last recession, in fact, Bradley says the company stood strong.

"In 2008, when everybody was going out of business, we had a record year," he says. "The biggest secret to our growth is just doing a better job."

Bradley Mechanical's expansion reflects what is happening across Chesterfield, which is finally leveraging its long-held reputation as a bedroom community to lure new businesses and jobs. Once seen as just a commuter county, Chesterfield is home to more and more residents who are finding work in their backyard.

Over the last five years, Chesterfield has added more jobs than any other locality in the Richmond region. In fact, according to data compiled by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics, Chesterfield ranked third among Virginia counties for job growth between 2013 and 2018.

Employment within the county increased by 15,990 over that period, trailing only Northern Virginia suburbs Fairfax County (25,631) and Loudoun County (22,797).

Beyond the raw numbers, county leaders are pleased that many new jobs have been created in the highest-paying sectors of the local economy: health care, professional business services and

construction and related trades, such as HVAC and plumbing.

"It's one thing to say we've had good job growth, but we're attracting the right kinds of jobs," Deputy County Administrator Matt Harris says.

Unlike U.S. localities that have seen surges in job creation because of major economic development projects, such as Cameron Parish, Louisiana, which saw local employment increase by 352% after the opening of a \$10 billion liquefied natural gas facility, Chesterfield's growth has been steady and diversified.

"It happens very quietly," Harris adds. "You see a tower go up in downtown Richmond or a building in Innsbrook and people naturally assume that's where the job growth is occurring. You don't see it as much in Chesterfield because the county is large and these employment opportunities are popping up in lots of places. But you look at the stats and it's there."

Throughout the 1980s and into the mid-'90s, as the county's population exploded and construction crews struggled to meet demand for new single-family homes, a narrative was established:

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BUSINESS PLANNER

Brad Bradley, owner of Bradley Mechanical, inside his company's new building off Courthouse Three Lane near the Chesterfield County Airport.

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**JOBS** from page 7

Chesterfield was a great place to live if you were looking for safe, quiet neighborhoods and quality schools, but if you wanted to work, you had to commute to Richmond or Henrico.

Now, as Chesterfield Chamber of Commerce CEO Danielle Fitz-Hugh notes, “the tides are shifting.”

Stung by deep budget cuts during the last recession, county leaders recognized that Chesterfield no longer can afford to be so disproportionately reliant on residential property taxes to fund local government services.

As the economy stabilized in the early part of this decade, the Board of Supervisors put the county on a course to aggressively pursue commercial development, which generates significant tax revenue while requiring less public services than residential housing.

At the same time, being easily the most populous county in the Richmond region finally became an advantage for Chesterfield, driven by a trend of people wanting to spend less time commuting and work closer to where they live.

“We have the land mass to build companies and residents to fill positions. The goal is to have people working and living in one community,” Fitz-Hugh says.

While The Results Companies qualified for state tax credits and other incentives

when it opened a new location in Midlothian earlier this year, Vice President of Human Resources Andrea Maizes points to availability of workers as the main reason her company decided to bring 600 call center jobs to Chesterfield.

“We go where labor is plentiful,” she says.

According to Garrett Hart, the county’s economic development director, that’s a significant change in the way the market works. Localities used to spend most of their time preparing potential sites and offering tax incentives to lure large companies, then workers would follow the jobs; Hart says the strategy now is to cultivate amenities that improve quality of life, thus luring potential workers first.

The update to Chesterfield’s comprehensive plan, which was approved earlier this year by the Board of Supervisors, reflects these new realities, encouraging high-quality mixed-use projects where people can live, work and play in the same pedestrian-friendly environment.

The board also has approved thousands of multifamily residential units in recent years to increase the county’s housing diversity and attract younger workers who aren’t yet ready to buy a large single-family home.

“As far as the county’s role, we have to create an environment people want to live and work in,” County Administrator Joe

Casey says.

Increasingly, people are moving to Chesterfield – or choosing to stay here – for reasons other than schools. Not long ago, two-thirds of county households had school-age children; now that number is one-third and falling, Casey notes.

Chesterfield is still a net exporter of approximately 30,000 jobs; 150,000 people leave the county daily and commute to employment opportunities elsewhere in the Richmond region, while 120,000 come to work in the county from surrounding jurisdictions.

Casey acknowledges a suburban locality like Chesterfield likely will always have some deficit in that regard. He says his goal is to reduce the gap as much as possible.

“Chesterfield’s prior reputation was a good place for you to have a family and get a good education for your children,” he adds. “The DNA of the people who came to Chesterfield, they cared about their children and they wanted to be in a place where they could stay in the school system for elementary, middle and high school. Work was secondary, as far as where it was located, and they didn’t mind commuting.

“Once you earn a reputation of some sort, good or bad, it takes years to pivot from it. You almost have to wait for the next generation to define the new reputation. We’re really on the cusp of that right now.” ■

# LEADERS WANTED

The Chesterfield Chamber is about more than business; it’s about building connections for a stronger community. One way we do that is by providing diverse opportunities for civic engagement and service.

On Sept. 17, the Chesterfield Chamber will kick off our newly revamped Leadership Chesterfield program with over 15 participants. This program is designed to help grow leaders who want to serve in the communities where they live and/or work. Comprising nine monthly sessions, the series helps people plug into areas they’re passionate about, giving newcomers and lifelong county residents a fresh perspective and a chance to step outside their comfort zones through volunteerism and community engagement.



Danielle Fitz-Hugh

We have partnered with Richard Bland College of William and Mary as our facilitator to take attendees through nine sessions covering the following areas: self-awareness, personal leadership vision, business landscape, strategy, public safety, analyzing your learning style, and personal brand. The program will travel around the county with different industry and government hosts offering facility tours. Each session builds on the last and ends with a lunch and networking opportunity so attendees can take the next step and explore community nonprofits in search of volunteers.

Our chamber is committed to helping leaders forge connections not only within the chamber, but with our community-focused groups as well. We are positive that as the program evolves, the selection process will continue to be highly competitive for attendees. To find out if space is still available in the 2019-20 season, or to enroll next year, please visit [ChesterfieldChamber.com](http://ChesterfieldChamber.com).



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## BUSINESS PLANNER

COMPILED BY ANNE DALTON

### THURSDAY, SEPT. 5

**Midlothian School Board Candidates Forum**, 5-7 p.m., Thunderbolt Indoor Karting, 1365 Carmia Way. Hear from Midlothian School Board candidates Kathryn Haines and Patrick Regan. Registration required. Sponsored by Midlothian Business Alliance. Free. [midlobusiness.com](http://midlobusiness.com)

### TUESDAY, SEPT. 10

**PDC Coffee Talk: Real Life Examples of Business Growth Through Sales Strategies That Work**, 8-9:30 a.m., Thunderbolt Indoor Karting, 1365 Carmia Way. Christopher Jones leads a panel discussion by individuals who are directly responsible for the sales growth of their business. Get practical tips from successful sales leaders to help you grow your business. \$10/nonmembers, free/members and guests. Presented by Chesterfield Chamber of Commerce. 748-6364, ext. 105, [chesterfieldchamber.com/events](http://chesterfieldchamber.com/events)

**Perfect Your Pitch**, 6:30-8:30 p.m., North Courthouse Road Library, 325 Courthouse Road. In this interactive workshop, presentation coach Joan Bowling helps you create engaging, conversational pitches that will open the door to sales and success. Registration required. \$25. 350-3569, [richmond.score.org](http://richmond.score.org)

### WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 11

**Chesterfield Chamber monthly luncheon**, 11 a.m.-1 p.m., Chesterfield Career and Technical Center @ Hull, 13900 Hull Street Road. Rob White, CEO of

Fastsigns, will speak on value-based relationships. Registration required. \$25/members, \$35/nonmembers by Sept. 6; \$30/members, \$40/nonmembers by Sept. 10; \$35/members, \$45/nonmembers at the door. 748-6364, ext. 105, [chesterfieldchamber.com/events](http://chesterfieldchamber.com/events)

### THURSDAY, SEPT. 12

**Chesterfield Chamber Young Professionals: Mix & Mingle**, 5:30-7:30 p.m., Uptown Alley, 6101 Brad McNeer Parkway. Network and connect with other professionals. Registration required. \$10/members, \$15/nonmembers. 748-6364, ext. 105, [chesterfieldchamber.com/events](http://chesterfieldchamber.com/events)

### FRIDAY, SEPT. 13

**Hispanic Connect RVA**, 8-9 a.m., Virginia Hispanic Chamber, 10700 Midlothian Turnpike. Members, business owners, community leaders, entrepreneurs and more can connect with their peers, share ideas and gain useful knowledge that they can use for themselves. Registration required. \$10/newcomers, nonmembers, free/members. 378-4099, [vahcc.com/hispanic-connect-rva](http://vahcc.com/hispanic-connect-rva)

### THURSDAY, SEPT. 19

**Economic Development Authority monthly meeting**, 3 p.m., Chesterfield Economic Development, 9401 Courthouse Road, Suite B. Lori Perez, 318-8567, [chesterfieldbusiness.com](http://chesterfieldbusiness.com)

### TUESDAY, SEPT. 24

**Chesterfield Chamber Gala**, 5:30-9 p.m., Doubletree by Hilton Richmond – Midlothian,

1021 Koger Center Blvd. Join others in the Chesterfield business community for an evening of celebration. Registration required. \$100/members, \$150/nonmembers. 748-6364, ext. 105, [chesterfieldchamber.com/events](http://chesterfieldchamber.com/events)

**Understanding Financial Statements**, 6:30-8:30 p.m., North Courthouse Road Library, 325 Courthouse Road. To succeed in business, you need to know how financial statements work, how to interpret them and how to use them to make better decisions. In this session, you’ll learn the purpose of a balance sheet, income statement and statement of cash flows, and how to translate financial data into action. A SCORE workshop. Registration required. \$25. 350-3569, [richmond.score.org](http://richmond.score.org)

### THURSDAY, SEPT. 26

**BREW: Journey to Entrepreneurship with Debbie Johnston**, 8-9:30 a.m., Stonehenge Golf and Country Club, 1000 Farnham Drive. Hear from Debbie Johnson, an expert at overseeing and operating company affairs with over 25 years of experience as a business executive and company leader. Sponsored by the Chesterfield Chamber’s Women’s Business Council. \$10/nonmembers, free/members. 748-6364, ext. 105, [chesterfieldchamber.com/events](http://chesterfieldchamber.com/events)

**Diversity Job Fair**, 11 a.m.-3 p.m., Virginia Hispanic Chamber, 10700 Midlothian Turnpike. Talk directly with employers. 378-4099, [vahcc.com/jobfair-rva](http://vahcc.com/jobfair-rva)

**Have a business event coming up?** Please email your event information, along with a contact name and number to [calendar@localnewslc.com](mailto:calendar@localnewslc.com), mail them to P.O. Box 1616, Midlothian, VA 23113, or fax them to 744-3269.



ASH DANIEL

# MAJORING IN WORK

At John Tyler, a new workforce training center offers a glimpse of things to come

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

**C**hristmas was still about three weeks away, but the atmosphere was festive as officials from John Tyler Community College brought together leaders of business and industry, local and state government, economic development and education for the grand opening of the Chester campus's sparkling new workforce development center.

The 25,503-square-foot William H. Talley III Center for Workforce Development, which was part of a \$34 million renovation of Bird Hall, houses the Community College Workforce Alliance, a regional workforce training partnership between John Tyler and J. Sargeant Reynolds community colleges.

It includes classrooms and training spaces, meeting rooms and a large "flex lab" that can accommodate a wide range of customized, hands-on workforce training programs.

"We've never had dedicated space like this," said JTCC President Ted Raspiller. "What goes on in there on Monday, something on Tuesday might be completely different. Having the ability to change purpose for the space in an agile way is what we're able to do more of now."

Construction of the Talley Center reflects the increasingly critical role that education and workforce development play in local and state governments' efforts to land lucrative economic development projects.

While economic development officials once focused on attracting new businesses with the understanding that workers would follow the jobs, that dynamic has been turned on its ear; at a time of significant labor shortfalls in the skilled trades, advanced manufacturing and technology sectors, companies now more than ever are basing their expansion and relocation

decisions on the supply of qualified employees.

"The last century was about natural resources. This century, it's human resources," Raspiller said. "When computers came on in the late '80s, all we heard about was the jobs computers were going to eliminate. Well guess what? That industry has created three jobs for every one they've gotten rid of."

"There will always be a role for people. The difference is, they're higher-level jobs now. There's no more 'Check your brain at the door, go and operate your machine, wash your hands and go home.' We're trying to up-skill an entire community."

Speaking earlier this year at an education summit hosted by ChamberRVA, Stephen Moret, president and CEO of the Virginia Economic Development Partnership, noted that the quality of its education system and workforce were the primary reasons CNBC named Virginia No. 1 in its 2019 rankings of the best states for business.

"If we had to pick one thing to absolutely nail, it would be education," he said. "It's absolutely essential to our economic growth."

When e-commerce giant Amazon began looking for a location for its second corporate headquarters in September 2017, Moret knew there would be fierce competition for a multibillion-dollar project promising 50,000 high-paying tech jobs. He also knew the leaders of Virginia's government would never sign off on the enormous direct financial incentives other states offer when pursuing large-scale economic development deals.

So VEDP took a novel approach. At the center of its proposal was a commitment to create a tech talent pipeline and provide Amazon with a

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John Tyler Community College's new William H. Talley III Center for Workforce Development opened earlier this month.

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steady supply of highly skilled workers.

The company initially chose to divide the new headquarters between Northern Virginia and New York City last November, but when New York backed out, Virginia landed the entire project.

“We were pleased because not only did we win, we won with a strategy that was completely asymmetric to every other state in the country,” Moret said.

According to Moret, Virginia’s “historic investment” in funding for state colleges and universities to develop tech talent won’t only benefit Amazon, but many other companies that also are having trouble filling positions in highly technical areas, such as software development and engineering, machine learning and artificial intelligence.

Now VEDP is applying that model to other fields, launching a new workforce development program in partnership with the Virginia Community College System that will create customized training programs for companies that expand or relocate to the commonwealth.

The goal of the Virginia Talent Accelerator Program is to provide those employers with a pool of workers who are trained and ready to go through the hiring process on day one.

“Workforce has become that important, but the other shifting piece of that is [employers are] not necessarily looking for people with four-year degrees,” said Karen Aylward, assistant director of Chesterfield Economic Development. “It’s about skill certification. That has to start in the high schools and the tech centers and the community colleges.”

Raspiller noted that 70% of the “middle-skilled jobs” in America, such as advanced manufacturing and trades positions, require acquisition of skills beyond a high school diploma but less than a bachelor’s degree.

Employment opportunities are abundant in those sectors and available to young people who either can’t afford to attend a four-year college or don’t want to spend

two decades after graduation repaying \$100,000 in student loans.

“We need to help kids realize those are good jobs,” said Garrett Hart, the county’s economic development director.

Chesterfield school officials have spent more than a year analyzing the school system’s career and technical education (CTE) program and refining the curriculum to bring it more closely into alignment with current and anticipated employment trends.

The School Board last month approved changes to the school system’s course offerings for the 2020-21 school year, eliminating dozens of CTE classes and replacing them with classes that haven’t been provided previously in Chesterfield – such as aircraft pilot training and aviation management.

“The benefit for these students – either in college credit or certifications and licensure – is it makes them more marketable and propels them, when compared to a peer that doesn’t have licensure, to opportunities

for employment,” said Chad Maclin, the school system’s director of career and technical education, in a November presentation to the School Board. “That’s what we’re about: helping students find their pathway to their prosperity. How can we inspire them to take chances and explore their passions?”

For some young people, that “pathway” does not end with a bachelor’s degree. But as Raspiller noted, that doesn’t mean they can’t have a financially rewarding career.

During the 2018-19 school year, 7,000 people received some type of job training through John

Tyler’s workforce development program. With the opening of the Talley Workforce Center, that number is expected to increase significantly in the near future.



PHOTOS BY ASH DANIEL



“It’s going to allow us to expand our offerings in manufacturing, logistics, IT, health care, trades, construction and transportation,” said Elizabeth Creamer, vice president of workforce development and credential attainment for the Community College Workforce Alliance. “And it will help us to be closer to the businesses we need to serve in the counties and in the cities that are part of this region.” ■

John Tyler’s president, Ted Raspiller, above, said the new workforce training center will allow the college to adapt to the different needs of the business community. It also includes casual work spaces and meeting areas, below.

**“Workforce has become that important, but the other shifting piece of that is [employers are] not necessarily looking for people with four-year degrees.”**

- Karen Aylward,  
Chesterfield  
Economic  
Development  
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## Stretching minds

Before desegregation,  
Carver principal  
was 'a strong man  
among men'

BY RICH GRISET STAFF WRITER

**F**or Jane Jiggetts Baskerville, her time at Chesterfield's Carver High School was defined by one teacher: Pauline W. Graham.

An instructor of English and Latin at Carver – and piano from her home – Graham was a polymath who left quite an impression on Baskerville.

"I felt like she knew everything in the world, and I wanted to be like her," says the 75-year-old. "She had a way of making you think and stretching you."

Encouraged by Graham's example at Carver, the county's lone high school for African-Americans from 1948 to 1970, Baskerville was encouraged to pursue the study of languages, including Spanish, French, Latin, German and Japanese.

"Going to Carver was really a wonderful experience for me," says Baskerville, who

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### A SWEET STORY

GOING BEHIND THE BARS  
WITH TAYLOR MADE'S  
FAIR-TRADE CHOCOLATE

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ASH DANIEL

## Up in the air

Mike Mickel molded Chesterfield's airport into a commercial hub.  
But after a clash with the county, his future remains unclear

BY JIM McCONNELL SENIOR WRITER

Dominion Aviation CEO Thomas T. "Mike" Mickel Jr. boards a Gulfstream corporate jet at the Chesterfield County airport in January. Recent changes at the airport, Mickel says, are hindering his company's ability to grow.

**J**anuary 16, 2019, looks and feels like any other chilly, early-winter day at Chesterfield County's executive airport. The sun's glare is blinding as it bounces off the metal exterior of a Gulfstream jet parked on the tarmac. In contrast to the stillness of the main terminal, music pierces the air inside Dominion Aviation's cavernous maintenance hangar as workers tend to repairs on a variety of brightly painted aircraft.

This mid-January afternoon marks a significant milestone for Dominion CEO Thomas T. "Mike" Mickel Jr. Thirty-five years ago, the then-22-year-old climbed behind the controls of his twin-propeller Beechcraft Baron airplane and ferried a local attorney from Richmond to Beckley, West Virginia. With the ink barely dried on his certification from the Federal Aviation Administration, Mickel's fledgling aircraft charter company had already completed its first revenue-generating flight.

"When you're 22, you think you can pretty much do whatever you put your mind to," Mickel says, as a small private plane rolls down a nearby runway and ascends into a cloudless blue sky.

Mickel and others, however, see storm clouds gathering on the horizon. For nearly 28 years, Dominion Aviation has been the Chesterfield airport's lone fixed-base operator; in addition to its aircraft management, charter and maintenance business, the company provides hangar storage and ground support services, sells fuel and operates a flight school under the terms of its October 1991 agreement with the county. But Dominion's exclusive domain ended last November when a divided Board of Supervisors decided to bring in a second FBO and give the company, Richmond Executive Aviation, a long-term lease on two pieces of prime real estate adjacent to the main terminal.

The company's CEO, Mark Hackett, finally

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received a signed and executed copy of the contract from the county in early February, clearing it to proceed with engineering on its two planned hangars. “We’re excited about it,” Hackett says. “This is the first time we’ve dealt with the county and we didn’t know what to expect. It was a long, drawn-out process.”

Now, as the county prepares to spend nearly \$20 million (mostly from federal grants) to extend the airport’s runway and replace its aging fuel farm, the man whose business helped usher the facility into the modern era is left to ponder what the next chapter holds. The location of a second airport operator next to the terminal has scuttled Mickel’s plans to expand his business in Chesterfield. Mickel insists he has no intention of building a hangar on the lone remaining unassigned pad site in the airport’s North Ramp area; to do so, he says, would create unacceptable safety conflicts between Dominion’s planes and the new operator. It’s possible he could move out of the terminal and shift his operation to another part of the airport property entirely – there’s land available if the county decides to develop it – but that’s likely not happening any time soon.

“It’s a setback in Chesterfield, but the FBO is just one part of the business. We’re going to continue to grow,” says Mickel, who declines to address the elephant in the room: Will the county’s recent moves ultimately force Dominion Aviation to pull up stakes and relocate? As it currently stands, the new FBO – Richmond Executive Aviation – has an agreement to operate at the Chesterfield airport for the next 30 years. Dominion’s FBO contract expires in December 2028.

**T**he Board of Supervisors’ action remains a mystery to many – particularly when you consider the economics. Dominion Aviation’s plan to build a new hangar to accommodate the addition of several larger, more expensive jets stood to bring the county an additional \$300,000 a year, mostly in property tax revenue. Dominion now has no capacity for those jets in Chesterfield. It likely will have to base the planes at another airport, and another locality will collect the resulting tax revenue.

“We’ve been trying to build a hangar” on the pad site immediately adjacent to the terminal, Mickel says. “I bring in a business plan that shows I’m going to generate \$677,000 [in annual revenue for the county]. Then this new guy comes in and says he’s going to generate \$66,000. They’re giving him the deal I wanted. They’re going to give county land to a person who has never been in the FBO industry and never run an aviation business.”

Mickel, who had been negotiating with



PHOTOS BY ASH DANIEL

Dominion Aviation’s mechanics work on airplanes inside a company hangar last month.

the county since 2013 to lease at least one of those pad sites for construction of a new 12,000-square-foot hangar, convinced supervisors Dorothy Jaeckle and Leslie Haley that his company’s track record of producing local tax revenue justified giving the leasing rights to Dominion. They were dumbfounded when a majority of the five-person board instead opted to enter into a 40-year land lease with an unproven entity led by Hackett, a retired pilot with JetBlue Airlines.

Haley claimed Hackett hadn’t provided the county with a detailed business plan or a manifest of the planes he planned to bring to Chesterfield as part of the new FBO. Jaeckle suggested the Board of Supervisors was within its rights under the county’s minimum standards for FBOs to reject Hackett’s application because he had made “false statements” in his presentation to the board.

“There are red flags all over the place,” said a clearly frustrated Jaeckle during the November 2018 Board of Supervisors meeting. “I feel like we are giving these prime pads away with really no indication that [Richmond Executive Aviation] can follow through with this undertaking.”

Rick Young, a local business owner and member of the county’s airport advisory board, says the decision is befuddling. “In my 38 years here, my experience has been if you can just clear away the smoke and get to the facts, you can count on the county to

do the right thing,” he adds. “I have never seen anything like this. It makes no sense.”

Others, however, contend a second FBO is needed to increase utilization of a public facility, introduce competition and break up what has been effectively a taxpayer-subsidized monopoly. Revenue generated by the airport is enough to cover its annual operating costs, but not major maintenance and capital improvements, such as the runway extension.

“I think we all know competition improves product, improves services and reduces prices,” said local pilot Ken Whitaker, a former member of the airport advisory board, during a marathon public hearing before the Board of Supervisors last October.

Mickel insists he has no problem with competition; the issue is the board’s decision to locate the new FBO right next to his existing operation in the terminal, which he says will interfere with his business and limit its future growth.

“I’m the biggest free market guy,” he says. “Bring in 10 FBOs for all I care. But you shouldn’t have them side by side and you shouldn’t pick winners and losers. Let everyone compete fairly.”

**M**ike Mickel fell in love with aviation as a child. His father had been seriously wounded in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II and had

limited use of his legs, so he convinced his wife to pursue a pilot’s license. They bought a small Cessna when their son was 7 and flying became a family hobby.

Mickel enrolled at Hampden-Sydney College, but later transferred to Virginia Commonwealth University because it was more convenient for his part-time job as a charter pilot for Piedmont Aviation, the general aviation division of Piedmont Airlines. Passionate about flying, Mickel was a senior when he decided to start his own company. He was Dominion Aviation’s solo pilot when the company launched in 1984; the Baron was his only aircraft.

Built in the early 1970s, the Chesterfield airport was still a small, sleepy operation when Dominion began flying charters there in 1986.

“Back when the county was managing the airport, Chesterfield had a very active pilot population,” recalled Jim Stack, one of the local private pilots who expressed support for adding a second FBO during the October 2018 public hearing. “We had somewhere around 100 to 125 people in a pilots’ association. We’d come out to the airport, it was our Sunday afternoon place to visit, we’d sit around and tell lies to each other about what great pilots we were.”

Based on the recommendation of a consultant and the airport advisory board, the county decided to privatize the airport’s operations in 1991 and issued a request for proposals from aviation companies

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FEBRUARY 15

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interested in establishing a fixed-base operation. Seven companies from across the country bid on the contract and the Board of Supervisors ultimately chose Dominion Aviation.

“They picked me because they wanted to attract corporate aircraft and they thought I had the best chance to bring them in,” Mickel says. “We had to do a 10-year pro forma. [The other companies] had these pipe dreams, they were going to do this or that, but they had nothing to back it up. I had plans for modest but steady growth and told them how I would do it.”

According to Mickel, Dominion Aviation’s gross revenues have increased on average 15 percent per year since he became the FBO in Chesterfield. He says the company’s growth has accelerated over the past five years as the economy improved and he landed deals to manage larger jets. The company currently has a fleet of 20 airplanes and employs 68 people with an annual payroll of \$4.1 million.

Dominion provided nearly \$360,000 in revenue to the county during fiscal year 2018 – including more than \$160,000 in personal property taxes on aircraft it either owns or maintains for clients, more than \$140,000 in rent and about \$50,000 in fuel flowage fees. The company’s planes use about 65 percent of the approximately 750,000 gallons of jet fuel pumped at the airport annually.

But beyond complaints that the airport isn’t as welcoming to “the little guy” as it used to be, some in the local aviation community also think Dominion is getting too good a deal from the county. Fred Mistr, a Chesterfield resident, longtime pilot and former member of the airport advisory board, calls the county’s past administration of the FBO contract “a heavily subsidized monopoly with no regulation” and criticizes county officials for “rubber stamping” periodic renewals of Dominion’s contract without considering whether the company’s growth warranted renegotiation of the original terms.

“The county had the right idea [to bring in an FBO], but oversight got left behind,” Mistr says.

Mickel disputes any suggestion that Dominion is “getting over” on the county financially. Scott Zaremba, a deputy county administrator, says that Mickel opened his company’s books to former county auditor Lou Lassiter and General Services Director Clay Bowles so they could verify what

Dominion is making off the FBO contract.

Asked if he thinks the agreement with Dominion is a bad deal for the county, Zaremba says no.

“There are some things 27 years later that we’d like to have different,” he adds. “But most of that is because of the passage of time and changing circumstances.”

If it weren’t for an 11th-hour disagreement with the county over office space in the terminal building, Mickel likely already would have built a new hangar on at least one of the pad sites the county is now leasing to Richmond Executive Aviation.

At the request of the Virginia Air National Guard, which leased an airport hangar in July 2013, the county asked Mickel to move Dominion’s charter operation from an adjacent hangar to the terminal building and eliminate the potential interaction of civilian and military traffic. Even though the available square footage in the terminal was less than half of the office space he’d be vacating in the hangar, Mickel accepted the new arrangement and agreed to fund renovation of the terminal to meet Dominion’s needs.

Mistr urged the Board of Supervisors to let the airport manager draw up procedures governing interactions between Dominion and the Air National Guard, then wait to see if there were actual operational conflicts prior to swapping the office spaces. The board voted in August 2013 to move forward with the change immediately, however.

After receiving written assurance from the county that he wouldn’t have to move out of the terminal as long as the Air National Guard was still leasing a hangar, Mickel says he spent \$70,000 on renovations to the first-floor charter dispatch area. Dominion also maintains a suite of offices on the second floor; Mickel’s office has windows that overlook the airport tarmac and runway. He also began making plans for construction of a new 12,000-square-foot hangar capable of accommodating larger private jets.

In November 2013, Mickel initiated conversations with county staff about a land lease for the North Ramp pad site next to the airport terminal. In exchange for a 30-year lease and an extension of Dominion’s existing FBO agreement by 16 years to coincide with that term, Mickel agreed to fund construction of the new hangar at

an estimated cost of \$750,000 to \$1 million and pay an increased fuel flowage fee.

Negotiations progressed quickly enough that the Board of Supervisors set a public hearing on the new land lease for its May

2014 meeting. Two weeks prior to that meeting, Mickel met with Charlie Dane – at the time the county’s General Services assistant director – and discovered the county had amended the terms of the agreement. To secure the lease and extension of his FBO agreement, Mickel would have to vacate the terminal so the county’s new airport manager could have an office there.

“I said, ‘Well, that’s not part of the deal,’” Mickel recalls. “They had just made me move up here less than a year earlier.”

The county hired Pat Driscoll, a retired rear admiral in the U.S. Navy and former Blue Angels pilot, as airport manager in March 2014. Some county officials thought it was important that Driscoll have a daily presence in the terminal. Others questioned whether the airport manager, whose primary duties are administering the FBO contract and working on grant applications, even needs to be based at the airport to do his job.

“It’s a real split of opinion,” Zaremba says.

The county asked Young and another local businessman, Steve Uphoff, who were members of the airport advisory board, to talk to Mickel and convince him to move out of the terminal so their deal could be finalized. They met over the weekend prior to the Board of Supervisors meeting and Mickel eventually agreed to vacate the terminal within five years.

Young and Mickel met again with Dane the day before the meeting, expecting it to be a formality. This time, Dane advised Mickel that Driscoll was working on changes to the way the airport tarmac would be managed in the future. Mickel would not sign the land lease until he saw the new rules under which his employees would be operating.

“Charlie reaches across the table, grabs the sheet of paper and pulls it back and says, ‘Well then, no deal,’” Young says. “That’s how close we came to getting this done.”

The Board of Supervisors postponed action on the land lease indefinitely to allow time for additional negotiations. The county and Mickel eventually entered mediation, but they were still unable to reach an agreement. By the time talks broke down for good, the county’s proposal had reduced the lease term by 10 years and increased Dominion’s fixed annual costs (including rent and fuel flowage fees) by 350 percent.

“I was going to finance [construction of Dominion’s new hangar as an investment],” local businessman William Chandler, a private pilot, told the Board of Supervisors last October. “The only thing I asked for was pad site 1 and a 30-year ground lease [to make the financing work]. The county would not agree. They offered only a 20-year lease, which I could not accept.”

Despite his frustration over the time and money spent on the failed negotiation, Mickel figured he’d have another opportunity to pursue a new North Ramp hangar at some point. Then he learned early last year that another aviation company was making a play for an FBO contract at the Chesterfield airport and leases on the two prime pad sites.

According to Hackett, Richmond Executive Aviation plans to build two 10,000-square-foot hangars on the pad sites, from which it will operate a flight school and provide a variety of other services: aircraft storage, fueling, maintenance and rental, as well as the sale and/or lease of aircraft and parts and supplies.

“No businessman in his right mind would start a business that’s going to cost millions of dollars if it isn’t going to meet a need,” he says. “That need exists at this airport for a reason.”

Several longtime members of Chesterfield’s aviation community spoke on Hackett’s behalf last October, suggesting REA will serve a segment of the market – private pilots with smaller planes – that has been pushed onto the back burner as Mickel focused on growing Dominion Aviation’s aircraft management and charter business.

“Contrary to what some might think, this is not a zero-sum situation,” said Gordon Bowers, who has flown out of the Chesterfield airport for the past 41 years.

Others, however, claimed giving REA the two pad sites closest to the terminal will interfere with Dominion’s existing operation and potentially create a safety issue on the North Ramp.

The National Air Transportation Association, a Washington-based aviation trade association, sent a letter to the Board of Supervisors last October in which it called regular interaction between smaller, piston aircraft and larger jets “a recipe for disaster and a potential risk of harm to people.”

But after multiple discussions with Driscoll and the county’s aviation consultant, supervisors Jim Holland, Chris Winslow and Steve Elswick concluded two FBOs can operate safely in Chesterfield under the arrangement they approved in November. They say they’re leasing the two prime pad sites to Hackett to give him the best possible chance to succeed.

“We looked at all scenarios, but we wanted to be fair and equitable,” Holland said in an interview following the board’s November vote. “We didn’t want to hamper him.”

What about hampering the existing FBO? “There’s still the third pad site open that’s large enough [for Dominion’s hangar],” Zaremba says. “There’s a school of thought that says he could build there if he wanted to.”

That’s a nonstarter for Mickel, who contends such an arrangement would compromise the reputation for safety and customer service Dominion Aviation has built over the past 35 years. It’s now Virginia’s second-oldest general aviation company still under original ownership.

“In an aviation business where lives are at stake every day, you have to have high standards,” he adds. “There are lines in the sand I won’t cross. This is one of them.” ■