



What's Next For Ron?

By Wayne Chandler

Ron Henriksen with his Piaggio P-180 Avanti, a two-engine, eight passenger plane which he flew last year on his 60th birthday as the first pilot to land a plane at his new airport.

When Ron Henriksen completes another huge terminal at Houston Executive Airport, and when he completes rebuilding his new airport in Austin... what is he going to do next? "Rest!"

That was the response by Henriksen, as he reviewed his past, and talked enthusiastically about his major focus now in the Katy area and in Austin, where he is changing the landscape and the economics in these two communities. These two developing reliever airports are beginning to have an impact, not only on air traffic, but business trends.

Henriksen, 61, in less than four years, has spent \$30 million of his own money and created a facility in the Brookshire-Katy area which is beginning to affect economic development for West Houston, Fort Bend and Waller Counties.

Talk to realtors in the Katy area. They'll tell you that there isn't a significant piece of property within miles of his new airport that hasn't been purchased recently, or is committed to development soon.

Now, Henriksen has purchased a floundering Austin air facility which is destined to become the only reliever airport near the

Texas capital where there has been a crying need by pilots and companies. Henriksen said that initially he thought operators of Austin's new international airport, Bergstrom, might view him as competition. What he found, instead, was open arms. "I could take these general aviation airplanes that they would just as soon not have and give them another place to land," Henriksen said.

At Houston Executive Airport, the skyline changed this year when his five-story, 26,000 square foot Henriksen Jet Center terminal was completed. It received rave reviews last month when Henriksen hosted his second annual "Fly-In." In addition to tours of the airport, the event also featured historic World War II vintage planes provided by the Lone Star Flight Museum. Scores of pilots flew in from hundreds of miles away, and some of them joined other spectators in taking rides in planes which helped win the world war.

The terminal building is visible from miles away now, and Henriksen said he plans a similar structure in the near future which should satisfy the demand for years to come.

Meanwhile, Henriksen's attention is

to the west, where he flits in and out of his new purchase site, the 134-acre Bird's Nest Airport, in northeast Austin. He paid some \$2.1 million for this facility, once used mainly for flight instruction and he plans to spend tens of millions more to update the facility. It has 15 based aircraft remaining, a dirt road that is actually an easement through a neighbor's property, and a main house that had been refurbished to serve routine services for small planes. The runway has been resurfaced since he took over last fall, and a new realigned runway is being designed. In addition, the entrance road will be improved to provide easier access, he said.

Henriksen, tall and thin, is cordial, and comes across as an unassuming man. His gentle manner belies the man's many abilities. He has been a pilot since college and has always been a handyman. It helped him succeed when he bought and maintained apartment buildings in Houston. He has patents on tools he invented.

Andy Perry, HEA executive director, has all the licenses and certifications to work on virtually any aircraft. "He can take apart and put back together a 747 engine," Perry said.

Henriksen has had the keen business sense, and courage, to recognize potential windfalls.

In 1983 after being a corporate pilot, and purchasing apartment complexes, he was becoming bored. He learned of an investment opportunity in a telecom startup in the wake of the federal act which deregulated the telecommunications industry, allowing small companies to compete successfully with AT & T. Rather than investing in another company, Henriksen did the math himself and spent \$5,000 to form his own company, American Telco, in Houston. Fourteen years later, with 300 employees and offices across Texas, he sold it for \$130 million.

"The company probably was worth about \$65 million," Ron said, "but there were four companies wanting it. I'd call one and say, 'well I've been offered \$90 million, and they'd say, 'we'll go 95'... then I'd call the next one and say I've been offered 95..."

By 2002, the new owner was losing \$5 million a month, and, the company now called Logix, filed for bankruptcy. Henriksen looked at the company again, and was the only bidder at \$23 million. Henriksen still saw value, cut costs and started selling "smart" wiring to office building owners so tenants could use one provider for all local, long distance and internet services. Ron, and a longtime friend, Matt Asmus, who was with him in American Telco, have the company on a profitable basis again.

The lure of the skies remained with Henriksen throughout his varied career. As he witnessed the closing of airports across the country, he decided to establish one that he could fully own and operate, ensuring its longevity and positive impact on the local community.

Henriksen said, "I always thought how neat it would be to own an airport some day and, as they say, do it right -- or do it the way you think is right."

With cash in hand, he started looking and originally found a site near Fulshear, but landowners nearby wanted to sell their rice-fields to homebuilders, and didn't want an airport. Ron already had spent about a million dollars before he gave up the fight.

"I was lucky," Ron said, "I found two sections of land together (640 acres each) where there wasn't already a road. He purchased 2,000 acres from the Cardiff family,



HEA owner Ron Henriksen at his new 26,000 square foot terminal.

who wanted to sell. The land is just north of I-10 in Waller County, just north of the Igloo company plant. Ron said that some 800 acres of the land on the west side probably never will be used by the airport. That leaves 1,200 acres, of which only about 250 acres now are in use.

"The most important thing is location," he explains, "I firmly believe that an airport has to be a reasonable distance from where people are who are going to use it." Being on the western edge of the Greater Houston/Katy Energy Corridor, is a convenient location.

When asked if he expects to get back his \$60 million which he personally has invested in these two airport properties, he said, "I'd like to get it back but it's not necessary to get it back. I know that's an odd way to answer the question, but the truth is, this is not only an investment in an airport, it's also an investment in our community."

"I have enough for my family, so I'll spend the rest as I think it ought to be spent. So if I get paid back, great."

Now, Henriksen sits on the Katy Area Economic Development Council board, where he is mindful of mutual interests

with area businessmen. He has established a foundation supporting pediatric outreach at hospitals in Houston.

A Chicago native, came with his family to Houston when he was 7 years old. His father, an airbrush artist, set up an advertising agency. Ron attended Memorial Elementary, Lanier Junior High and Lamar High School, and spent a year at Texas Tech. He didn't like the West Texas weather, and transferred to Sam Houston State, where he started flying, and leased an airport with a friend. Eventually, he sold out and went back to school, graduating with a B.S. degree in mathematics.

Years of focusing on his career left Henriksen little time to date until at the age of 43 he met his wife, Sheri, through a dating service. Sheri had followed a similar path and had become a successful engineer. It all started with lunch.

"We had lunch. I liked her, and she liked me. We dated, fell in love, and got married," Ron said. They have two sons, James, 15, and Matthew, 13.

Will his sons follow him into aviation? "I want them to make their own decisions," Ron said. "It will be up to them." ★