

# Aeronautics Division

## NDOT 2021 Strategic Communications Plan



*Mission:* We provide the best possible statewide transportation system for the movement of people and goods.

### 2020 HIGHLIGHTS

The Nebraska Aviation Symposium is generally held every January in Kearney. The 2020 event took place January 22-25, 2020 and was one of the last “regular” events to occur in 2020 for the Aeronautics Division. The Symposium, hosted by the Nebraska Aviation Council, featured pilot safety and aircraft mechanic seminars as well as presentations by the FAA on airport operations and grant administration. Dave Lehnert and Thomas Jacobson from Aeronautics made a presentation on Aeronautics’ airport licensing program. Ann Richart, Director of Aeronautics, made a presentation on how Aeronautics was implementing NDOT’s Four Focus Areas.

In March, COVID-19 was declared a pandemic. This set the stage for unusual and unplanned activity at Aeronautics for the rest of the year.

- In early March employees were notified that arrangements would need to be made to work remotely, as much as possible, in order to keep employees safe from the virus by not interacting with the public or with each other unless necessary.
- Some employees were able to work remotely and were given equipment and support needed to set up “home offices.” Other employees had challenges that made it difficult to work remotely. Aeronautics was able to arrange workspaces in the office so that work in the office remained safely “socially distanced.” Weekly staff meetings and other meetings have been held via Zoom and continue to be held this way.
- Airport visits were canceled in 2020 to prevent spread and exposure to the virus. Aeronautics set up conference calls and virtual meetings as much as possible to keep clear communication channels with our airports.
- Airport inspectors altered their typical inspection protocols in order to ensure that employees weren’t riding in cars together, minimal interaction with airport managers and other members of the public was maintained, and overnight stays were eliminated as much as possible.
- Two new employees: Engineer I and Airport Services Manager. Both employees were interviewed, hired, and on-boarded under pandemic guidelines.

In addition to personnel impacts, the pandemic had enormous and lingering impacts on the aviation industry. Aeronautics dedicated fuel tax revenues declined by 33% during CY-2020 as compared to CY-2019. Congress created three additional grant programs to provide relief to airports, including the 73 Nebraska airports that are included in the National Plan of Integrated Airports System. In addition to our administration of the legacy FAA grants programs, the Airport Improvement Program and the Supplemental Airport Grant Program, Aeronautics staff also administered grants under the CARES Act, the Airport Coronavirus Response Grant Program, and the Airport Rescue Grants.

### 2021 GOALS

#### Improve level of service provided to airports, aviation businesses and pilots

*Tactics:*

- Develop ongoing communication tools customized to various interest groups.
- Implement process improvements in airport grant payment process. Develop a dashboard metric for tracking this.

#### Explore partnerships with other agencies, consultants and other states

*Tactics:*

- Use State Aviation System Plan as introduction to meet with other agencies and explore ways to help each other.
- Meet with three aviation consulting firms (outside of projects) every quarter to discuss future plans and brainstorm ways to better serve our customers.

#### Modernize and streamline current business practices

*Tactics:*

- Work with the NDOT Drone Team to develop airport inspection documentation, possibly including videos and elevation data sheet.
- Explore and implement opportunities to use consultants to perform tasks in order to reduce timelines, improve service levels and increase service offerings.
- Explore ways to utilize existing NDOT processes to replace/modernize/improve existing practices.

#### Plan for business continuity during employee turnover

*Tactics:*

- Have each employee develop a “manual” of work practices that can be used to cross-train others or train replacements.
- After the pandemic have all employees return to the office. Then individually review remote working options.
- Clean out old furniture/obsolete equipment/junk. Make room in workspaces for clean and efficient work flow.

## 2021 PRIORITIES

In 2021 Aeronautics will be looking to return to normal operations following all the severe disruptions associated with the pandemic. Key elements of this transition will be:

- Incorporate the lessons learned during the pandemic into new procedures
- Continue to track revenue trends and adjust Division operations as necessary
- Focus on our goals

The Aeronautics team is invested in the organizational goals and working hard to meet our goals in 2021, even during the pandemic response.

### KEY PROJECTS

Key projects the Aeronautics Division will be focusing on:

- State Aviation System Plan
- Grant Payment Process Improvement
- Business Continuity Planning

The **State Aviation System Plan** is 90% funded through a grant from the FAA and follows the FAA's guidance in Advisory Circular 150/5050-7 the Airport System Planning Process. The FAA's blueprint calls for a four-pronged approach to planning an airport system: (1) Define the needs of the system, (2) Develop a system-wide development cost analysis, (3) Determine which aeronautical needs should be met by a system of airports, and (4) Develop state standards for the non-primary public use airports.

We will examine how our airports support Nebraska's agricultural, tourism and medical access industries. We'll also explore as industry advances in the use of drones and the introduction of hybrid and electric aircraft on the impact to our needed airport infrastructure.

**Federal grant money** for airports is channeled through Aeronautics for approval before being sent on to the airport. The significant numbers of additional grants process in 2020 due to pandemic relief programs for airports exacerbated delays in getting grant funding to airports. There was no documentation of the grant payment process, individual staff members weren't sure of the causes of the increasing turn-around times, and the airport sponsors became frustrated. With the assistance of NDOT's Process Improvement Team, consulting engineers, the FAA, and our team, we used the Lean Six Sigma process to document our current process, evaluate the steps necessary and determine steps that could be eliminated or improved. This process is still underway and being vetted by the FAA. Aeronautics is looking forward to a positive outcome that will result in better service to our customers and happier teammates.

**Business Continuity Planning** - Two-thirds of Aeronautics' employees will be eligible to retire within the next five years. The Aeronautics management team has set a personal goal for each employee to develop a book of SOPs of their position to use as an aid for training new employees. We are also working closely with HR in making strategic staffing changes as opportunities arise to better serve our customers.

### OPPORTUNITIES FOR INTERNAL COLLABORATION

*This section includes internal opportunities for divisions and districts to collaborate and work together to accomplish their goals.*

**Strategic Planning** – Creating dashboards and updating and developing manuals and process documents.

**Communications** – Designing our public documents and ensuring that agency communications include Aeronautics transportation issues. Incorporating aviation milestones and events into social media posts. Providing support to the Aeronautics Commission.

**HR** – Testing new ways to ensure recruitment of vacant positions.

**BTSD** – Creating GIS maps, assisting in modernizing and digitizing our processes, and partnering to assist with methods to track project status. Assist us in our efforts to create a web portal on our website to allow airports to more easily access construction and grant documents.

**Legal & Controller** – Explore ways to use existing NDOT revenue streams to offset significant losses to Aeronautics operating revenues resulting from the pandemic.