

The History of Stellar Airpark



In 1969, Harold (Tom) L. Earley Jr., a cotton farmer, dreamed of the ability to land a plane and taxi it directly to your home. He formed Stellar Development Corp. and collaborated with others to market his idea as “Stellar City Air Park”. The airpark would be located in today’s west Chandler, surrounded by agricultural land south of Williams Field Road, which is now Chandler Blvd.

The original plan called for forty homes with direct access to the homes via private taxiways, and another forty homes just off the airport that had access and parking for their aircraft at the so-called tie-down area. Original facilities included a wash rack, maintenance hangar and fueling service for the residents and general aviation public. They also built a general hangar for maintenance of aircraft, for those based at Stellar and the general public. Interestingly, the original plan called for a hotel/motel and aircraft parking near the north end of the runway. It also included plans for a “then popular” aircraft gas station on the ground level,



and a restaurant on an upper level. The residents and the general public could enjoy watching the planes take off and land while having breakfast or lunch. Earley died in a plane crash on September 11, 1975, before seeing his dream fully developed.

Tom Van Sickle, a local developer, bought the property in 1976 from the Earley Estate. Tom formed a private company, Stellar Executive Services, and developed the land east of the runway called Stellar Industrial, Unit One and Unit Two. He borrowed the money from Southwest Savings and Loan to develop the industrial side by using the south half of the airport property as collateral. In 1979 the City of Chandler annexed the entire development, including the homes. During the economic recession of the late 1980s, Southwest Savings became insolvent and all assets were seized by the Resolution Trust Corp. for disposal. The south half of the runway property, along with all the adjacent tracts, mostly drainage and easements, were transferred to the Resolution Trust.

In 1990, residents discovered that the airport’s land taxes were delinquent and in danger of being transferred to a tax lien purchaser. Two of the residents, Mike Kramer, a business owner, and Dan Perry, a property tax consultant, along with several other residents, scraped together money, including a \$15,000 loan from resident Merrill Matney. This was used for an emergency legal fund to fight Maricopa County on the delinquent taxes. At the same time they formed a non-profit corporation virtually overnight, named, Stellar Runway Utilizers Association, which would buy the land from the Resolution Trust Corp., who listed the property on their books as “un-sellable”, for an amazing \$500. The forty property owners became members of the corporation. Maricopa County eventually compromised on the outstanding tax bills of the incorrectly assessed \$200,000 down to \$1,000. Van Sickle graciously quit claimed the north half of the airport property to the SRUA. All the airport property was consolidated in to one parcel and reclassified as common area for the purpose of tax assessment. SRUA would later sell part of the property at the south end of the runway (now the 202 freeway) to ADOT. Most of those proceeds were used to reimburse the donations and loan. The (SRUA) currently manages, operates and maintains Stellar Airport to this day.



In 1991 as a result of the initiative and success of being able to save the runway, overcome the delinquent tax burden and keep the living with your airplane dream alive, homeowners wanted to celebrate the victory and hence the first “Stellar Day” was held. It was a time to celebrate and everyone brought pot-luck food and drink and maybe even a few libations. It would be celebrated every year from then on. Once again, everyone was so happy to just be at Stellar. Different activities were conducted including spot landing and bomb drop contests and the keen aviators would often receive awards made by some hobbyists.



In 1999, Mark-Taylor, a high-end apartment developer, purchased the land south of the existing homes. Jeff Mark of Mark-Taylor, worked with the SRUA to insure the existing homeowners and planned new community would coexist with the addition of 65 new lots. SRUA would provide land, easements and some drainage for the new development, and Mark-Taylor would renovate the entire airport. The new gated “Stellar Airpark Estates” opened in 2000. Models were built and lots went quickly because of the airpark theme of “living with your airplane,” along with Mark-Taylor’s reputation of high end design and construction standards. The renovated runway, taxiways, lighting and upscale homes gave the Stellar community a fresh new look and an increased sense of pride. The new residents were anxious to become part of the Stellar Community. Stellar Airpark was fast becoming one of the premier airparks in the United States, and definitely raised the standards for airpark living by taking Earley’s airpark dream to a new level.

Ten years later in 2009 the airport once again went through a major renovation. Two of its members, Ron Pratte & Jeff Mark offered to completely reconstruct the entire airport runway, taxiways, infields and ramps, at no cost to the membership. The primary reasons were to improve safety through newer, more advanced lighting and navigation aids, widening the runway and taxiway widths, and reducing obstructions, electrical use and water use. The project was completed in an amazing 100 days. Once again Stellar members came forward, but this time they volunteered financial donations to offset some unforeseen costs associated with sub-soil issues. Others contributed their time and energy to the project, and the airport is today is one of the finest places to fly in and out of. This was one of the most generous contributions Stellar has ever received and all its members are eternally grateful for the generosity for this project, as well as the contributions of all the others.



At the same time of the renovation, Ron Pratte, one of Stellar’s own residents developed the last vacant residential property on the north end of airport. It too would be beautifully gated and known as Stellar Estates II. Today lots are ready for custom gated home construction. The original airpark entrance would be relocated to the larger Galaxy Drive and no expense was spared in the infrastructure and landscaping of the new entrance and adjoining common area.

42 years after start up, all of the residential property would be developed and Tom Earley’s dream would come to fruition.

Stellar Airpark is an important **“Part of Chandler’s History”**

www.stellarairpark.org

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