

Karl Von Hagel Interview
Larry Brantley Thompson Collection
Conducted by James Newberry
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Full Transcript

Interviewer: All right, this is James Newberry, and I'm here with Mr. Karl Von Hagel, the Airport Manager at the Cobb County International Airport. It's May 12th, 2021. And thanks, Karl, for sitting down with me. Do you agree to this interview?

Von Hagel: I do.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. Can you tell me your full name?

Von Hagel: Karl Anthony Von Hagel.

Interviewer: And what's your birthday?

Von Hagel: February 6th, 1964.

Interviewer: Where were you born?

Von Hagel: Cincinnati, Ohio.

Interviewer: Tell me your parents' names.

Von Hagel: Well, Margaret Von Hagel and Raymond Von Hagel.

Interviewer: And would you mind sharing what they did for a living?

Von Hagel: Yeah. My mother was a homemaker, and my father was a line mechanic at an assembly plant that manufactured steel cans, your vegetable cans, that sort of thing. He made sure all the automated equipment was working. So, the blue-collar worker.

Interviewer: And tell me about your education.

Von Hagel: So, I went to Ohio State University. There I received a bachelor's degree in Aviation Transportation. Following that, I attended graduate school at Ohio State, pursuing a Master's in Public Administration. But before I finished, I accepted a position as Airport Director in Cadillac, Michigan, where I operated the fixed-based operation, the airport. And I also was the manager of the entire airport. So, I'd never finished the master's program.

Interviewer: I'm sure we'll circle back around to this when we come to the Cobb airport here. But could you define the FBO, the fixed-based operation?

Von Hagel: Yeah, so fixed-based operation essentially means it's the gas station on the airport. So, where a lake would have a marina where all the boats dock get their services. We in aviation have FBOs, which is short for fixed-based operation, which are essentially a marina on the airport. It's where all the aircraft park, where they get all their services and fuels and the terminal, and anything they might need comes from the FBO.

Interviewer: So, you mentioned the airport there in Cadillac. Were there others that followed that before you came to Georgia?

Von Hagel: Yeah, so I worked at the Ohio State University Airport first while I was a student, then was hired on full-time there. So then moved up to the airport manager at Cadillac, Michigan. And was there for a few years, then moved to Toledo Express Airport in Toledo, Ohio, and was their operations manager there. And it was only there about maybe just short of two years. When I accepted the position here in Marietta at the Cobb County Airport.

Interviewer: What drew you into this profession?

Von Hagel: So, I started when I was very young, when on my first Delta Airline Flight, maybe second grade, and thought that was the neatest thing in all the world to be flying. So, first inclination was, "Dad, I want to be a pilot." So, went ahead and got my pilots license when I was 17. I think it was a real shift. Yeah, 17. Got my pilot's license, went up, got my commercial, my instrument, all my ratings that I needed to do to be a pilot, and went to school at Ohio State to get the degree that would support it. And as I was working at the Ohio State University Airport and still working on some of my ratings, I decided that I enjoyed working at the airport more than I actually wanted to have the career of flying the airplane.

So I really enjoyed working at the airport, and I started to focus more of my energies towards airport work, and it just blossomed from there when I forgot that first airport manager's position and enjoying the variety and being around all the people in aviation all the time having a more regular schedule for family life than a pilot does. All of it for me personally just lined really well to stick with working at the airports, not working on the airplanes.

Interviewer: Can you be an introvert and do the job? I mean, how would you describe your personality? What makes you suited to this?

Von Hagel: I think there are jobs at airport or airport management side of it that you can be an introvert like anything depending on the size of the airport, depends on the number and the specialties that are there. So, if we take Atlanta Hartsfield. Atlanta Hartsfield has hundreds of employees all the way down to the people that pay the bills and a cubicle

to the people that interact every day with the public and have to be an extrovert. So, you can be an introvert or an extrovert. My particular position is airport manager. You really have to have the ability to speak with people, to interact with people, to have relationships with people. So, there's quite a bit of an extrovert blessing that you have to have in order to be successful because you're everything you're doing is bringing people together and bringing teams and coaching. Coaching towards goals and priorities. And an introvert would have a tough time in the manager's position, but there are certainly roles even for introverts in the business side of airport management.

Interviewer: Excellent. Thank you. So how did you learn about the job here and what was the job?

Von Hagel: So, I was in Toledo, Toledo Express Airport. I was not happy at Toledo Express Airport. Toledo Express Airport had seven airlines, and as a fairly busy airport and what I found going from my previous position, general aviation airport to commercial service airport was the commercial service airport was more about the business. It was more about the money. It was more about people's careers, promotions, and the dollars and cents involved. And I didn't like it that much. And I really liked the general aviation, where people were either doing their hobby, doing their pleasure, doing business, but in a sense that they enjoyed being there. It was a choice to be at the airport, not a burden to be, "I have to fly to a business meeting somewhere, and I'm in a bad mood, to begin with." You come to this airport. It's usually a good atmosphere to be around.

So, I wanted to get out of the commercial service aviation back to general aviation. And I looked all over the country. My wife and I, we wanted to find the right place to come to. We saw this position advertised, applied. And actually, I had many interviews at different airports. And we were very selective where we were going to go, and thank goodness this one took over a year, I think, to hire me to get through the whole process. And I didn't take any of the other positions that were out there and came here because this one really suited what I was looking for. It was a general aviation airport. So back to the fun stuff, very busy airport, very active airport, and a very supportive government. They wanted the airport to improve. They were looking to the future. They weren't interested in it staying like it was. They wanted it to move forward. And I'm a very, very active, very aggressive, very engaged airport manager. So, it's not my nature just to sit. And so, we matched perfectly. They wanted a lot done. I want to do a lot. Anyway, worked out great.

Interviewer: So, for my own personal interest, the advertisement was that in a paper, I mean, how did you-

Von Hagel: Back then. It was 30 years ago. So back then, it was a newsletter. So, to find... There's an association, American Association of Airport Executives. So, I am an accredited airport executives. I mean, it's kind of like a CPA or a professional engineer. You get your letters. So, you go through the program, got my letters. This organization also had a newsletter, and the newsletter is where airport manager jobs would show up at airports and

newsletter would come have all the jobs listed out and back then was all by mail and you'd mail.

Interviewer: Which others did you look at? What places around the-

Von Hagel: My wife and I had decided that we wanted to be in a smaller community, not a large metropolitan area. So, we had looked at Green Bay, Keene, New Hampshire, Walker Shaw, Wisconsin, those kind of caliber, middle-sized cities, kind of thing. And actually, this one interested us because it was far enough from Atlanta. Especially 30 years ago, not Metro Atlanta. This was a little outside Atlanta in Kennesaw, Georgia. And it just met all those parameters. We were talking about the busyness of the airport. There were 300 airplanes here. They wanted to do a lot. It wasn't in urban environment, and it just ticked all the boxes. And anyway, so this is the one we selected that worked out good.

Interviewer: And who did you interview with, and what was the process?

Von Hagel: So, the interview was with the director of transportation. So, I remember we had actually came home from an interview at another airport, and we walked into our home, and I had a message on the answering machine, and it was, "Hello, Mr. Von Hagel. This is May from Cobb County Department of Transportation. And Mr. Croy, Jim Croy would be interested in talking to you about our airport manager's position." So, we called up Ms. May, and Ms. May made an arrangement. We had a telephone interview first with Mr. Croy. That went well enough, and we ended up having a personal interview a little later. He flew me down, and we had a one-on-one interview and met some people in the county engineers. I think that was the first person 11. Then I had to come back down again. And I think I met with the board of commissioners. And the board of commissioners interviewed me in an executive session and was given the position.

What I was very fortunate, I mentioned earlier, it took a year to kind of get that phone call. Well, what had happened was the original advertisement went out a year prior. The original director of transportation had gone through. He told me there was, I think, they said there was 300 applications, and he had gone through those 300 applications and selected a shortlist.

Well, before they acted on that short... I wasn't on that shortlist. Before they acted on that shortlist, a new department director came in and replaced him, and he went through his pile, and he said, "Bring me back the big pile." Brought back the big pile and picked his shortlist from it. And phone interview, the shortlist which got down to me, and he said, "Yeah, you weren't in the first list." It was interesting. So anyway, there was about, I think they said, 300 applications at that time. So, it's incredible that the odds of me being picked.

Interviewer: It was totally handled through the county.

Von Hagel: It was.

Interviewer: And did you meet anyone who was working here at the airport when you came down?

Von Hagel: I think I might've met Mr. Brown.

Interviewer: And who was that?

Von Hagel: Mr. Bob Brown, he was the owner and operator of the FBO, the fixed-based operation that provided all the services to the airplanes. So, he's a very instrumental person on the airport coordinating the kinds of services that pilots were receiving. So, the airport manager and the FBO Manager owner worked very closely together to give the best service to our customers. So, I believe I met him that first time around.

Interviewer: And was your position previously filled?

Von Hagel: It was. So, I'm the second airport manager ever at Cobb County Airport. The first Airport Manager was Sam Smith. He was hired in; I think it was 1987. And he really kind of got the ball rolling, getting the system of operating, running the airport organized. He retired, and that was the impetus for the advertisement to get the next airport manager, which of course, was me. And Sam passed away a year or two ago. But he was out here five years, did a fantastic job setting up the what we call our master plan. And the master plan is a 20-year outlook.

He had spent his few years setting up the plan. And when I mentioned that I came in and they had an aggressive plan, and they wanted to make improvements to the airport, they were based upon that master plan that Sam had put together. And so, Sam had put the plan together, my task was coming in and implementing the plan, building what they had envisioned. And that's what we've done over the 30 years. Far enough now that over these 30 years, we've implemented our next plan. So, we've gone through that 20-year plan, started another plan, and are executing that.

Interviewer: And was that plan... Can you tell me about that plan? What did it include at the time for the airport? What was the outlet?

Von Hagel: Well, we had one. Well, we actually had two FBOs at the time, but we were building a new FBO site. So, we had two FBOs sharing the North side of the airport. The idea was to open up an FBO location on the south side so that the FBOs would be separated. They both could get more land. So now there's one FBO on the north side, one FBO on the south side. So, it had to do with developing acreage for additional hangars. It had to do the primary focus was extending the runway. We had a runway that was, I think it was 5,100 feet at that time. And our plan was to extend it to 6,300 feet, which we've done. And we extended all the taxiways with it. We had to spread the aprons out where the airplanes park because they were 300 airplanes that were just stacked all over the place.

So, it was all about expanding the airport, expanding the standards, building a control tower. So, it was an uncontrolled airport, meaning there was no control tower. So we had to build a control tower, turn it into a controlled airport so that we had that facility in place, and all about really the way I used to explain it to the community is we had this little country airport, and it needed to be turned into a city airport. It needed some guidance, some correction, some improvements because you got a lot of people and you need a water when you got a lot of people, and you need space when you got a lot of people. And we were able to bring it up to a good corporate airport as opposed to a grass. We were able to bring it up to a good corporate airport as opposed to a crop-dusting airport.

Interviewer: I see. So, you mentioned speaking to the community, and one of the things that Mr. Brown mentioned in my interview with him was that when you came in, there was more outreach, there was more community engagement. What was the reason for that? And can you give me some examples of that?

Von Hagel: So, when I came to the airport in 1993, the community had organized to protest the airport, to object to the airport being here, not only to object to the plan that was in place to improve the airport, they objected to the airport.

Interviewer: Just in general.

Von Hagel: Just in general. The airport made noise over the neighborhoods. So, it took me few years of going around meeting with homeowners' associations, individual interaction, either by email or phone calls or personal meetings going out the neighborhoods and sitting in the car in a neighborhood for a few hours to experience the noise that the neighbors were complaining about. And I would sit there and just interact and empathize with the circumstances they were in, understand the circumstances they were in, but try to get their understanding that the improvements that the airport was looking to make would actually be beneficial to short of closing the airport. If you short of closing the airport, that's not going to happen. The improvements we were proposing, extending the runway, putting the control tower in was all going to benefit their noise situation.

By moving the airplane, runway start points farther from their neighborhood so that the airplanes would be higher than they would be. Otherwise, the farther you move that stark point away, the farther the airplane has to get higher as it goes out. So, trying to put some perspective and understanding to them, and I'm not going to say they all understood, and they all loved it. But they all understood. They had somebody that was at least listening to them, and it was responsive to their questions and were comfortable enough that they had their say and either got tired of saying what they were going to say, that it wasn't really going to make a difference or understanding that their opinions were heard. But the plans were moving forward because the leaders of

the county had determined so. And there was a safety element getting to the folks to understand.

Recognizing the Cobb County was a growing community. We've gone from, I think, it was like 300,000 people in 1993 to 800,000 people in 2020. So, you have people coming. We knew in 1993 that we're not staying at 300,000 people. Airplanes and people and traffic are coming. And there's one of two things that can happen. One, we put blinders on, and we ignore it. And those airplanes come to a very crowded airport in a very crowded airspace without any safety improvements. And we all hope for the best, or we accommodate that through, for example, the control tower, putting a control tower so we can control and make sure that traffic is safe coming in. And that way there was protection to the folks because they literally were worried about airplanes falling on their house.

Interviewer: How long was that an issue? This community feedback?

Von Hagel: Yeah, I would say that was probably about five years.

Interviewer: From the time you came?

Von Hagel: Yes. So, it started before I was here. But from what I came from '93, I'm going to say it was five years of pretty regular communications. And we were used to describe the change that happened was we went from organized effort to being upset at the airport that we want the airport to close or discontinue or freeze. However, you want to word it. To after about that five years, it's kind of shifted that we're against that one airplane that flew over our house last night. It went from macro that everything bothers us to micro that we started to look at just events, that one jet flew over my house and shook my windows. We seem to get past the discussion that these airplanes are driving me nuts. You need to close the airport.

Interviewer: Right.

Von Hagel: And that was a big step forward for the community to recognize and to say, "Okay." And we, to this day, we work with the community on events, a particular jet shook our windows, or a particular airplane flew low. And we will investigate that to see if there's anything that can be done or changed or communicated to a pilot to avoid that happening again if it was inappropriate. But I think, for the most part, we've got away from the macro. It's no longer the airports the problem. It's that airplane that day was the problem.

Interviewer: Sign of improvement.

Von Hagel: Sign of improvement.

Interviewer: So, you spoke about the extension of the runway to 6,300 feet and the air traffic control tower, the first one, which of those projects came first?

Von Hagel: Let's see. The control tower came in 1995. The runway extension came something like 2001 or something in that area. So, the control tower was first a lot easier to do.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Von Hagel: Because of the processes is involved. So, building a structure is pretty straightforward. You just get an architect, find your funding and build it. The runway extension took several years just to get through the environmental and the planning processes. We had to cross a creek. And crossing that creek with the runway was going to involve 6, 10 foot by 12-foot barrels of concrete culvert. So right now, you put all those barrels together. It's 60 feet wide, 12 feet high to carry the creek under the runway extension. In order to construct something like that, we have to relocate or realign the creek.

So, what used to be a meandering creek turns into a straight creek, and it's a straight creek, not where the old meandering creek was. So, the environmental process, when you look at what wetlands you need to fill in, what flood plains you need to fill in, now you've constructed a man-made structure. So, you have to do the hydrology work. What if there's the 400-year flood, you got a wall of water coming down the creek, and you just now restricted the water to 60 feet wide and 12 feet high. You've created a dam with just 160 foot by 12-foot outflow. What does that do to the upstream property owners?

So, all of these elements had to be evaluated. The endangered species threatened species had to be accommodated. And once you figure out all the impacts and how you're going to deal with the impacts, then you have to do the mitigation, meaning, I'm filling in. I think we fill it in something like one and a half acres of wetlands as part of this project, or you're filling in one and a half acres of wetlands, so you have to amend for that. How are you going to amend it?

So, we had to go through a process with the Corps of engineers as to what was an equivalent amount of wetlands, we could make somewhere else or streams that we could preserve in documents forever. That would make up for the one and a half acres that we were going to fill in. So, it took years to get the permitting. And then once we got the permitting, I think it took us three, maybe four grants. So, four years of construction to actually build the runaway extension. Because not only do you have that 60-foot-wide by 12-foot high culvert, you've got about 35 to 40 feet of fill dirt.

So, where's all that fill dirt going to come from? So, we had to find arrangements to find that material at a reasonable price. And then you got to actually do all that work, and it has to be broken up because, for our size airport, the FAA just doesn't give you a... I forget what the project number was, had \$20 million or something, just read an example. They don't just give you \$20 million on some. I gave you 6 million this year, 4

million, then next year, 5 million then next year kind of thing. So, you got to break the project up to meet the funding schedule.

Interviewer: And this extension was down here at the east-

Von Hagel: East end.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the West end of the airport is the original west end, or has that been extended at all?

Von Hagel: No. That's the original West end. And actually, that West end and that original plan, interesting story. So, when Sam Smith had created that first master plan, that first master plan had the West end part of the runway being demolished. The part that went beyond, I think it's like 600 feet or 700 feet. It went West of the last taxiway and has a little turn key turn down their keyhole turn, where the airplanes could turn around and use the whole runway. And the master plan had that being demolished. And we sat around as we were starting to look at the implementation and what projects are going to go first and second and all that sort of thing. And we looked at the demolition to that West end of the 600 feet or whatever it was. Why are we knocking that out? Why would you ever take pavement that's on and run away and make it go away, especially when you're trying to extend it?

So, we went around and did some brainstorming, and we made a proposal to the FAA that we keep that pavement there. And that pavement, FAA agreed to our proposal. So that pavement stays, and it's still there today. And it's not usable for all aircraft at all times. But it's usable by some aircraft sometimes. And so, we've incorporated that into our long-term plan that we keep that. And now, in this future plan that we're looking at, our next iteration of a master plan, we're looking at old 41, the road down there relocating that road or removing that road, whichever the case may be. But that road right now is too close to that runway, which is why that runway can't be used by all aircraft, all-time in all directions. So, we have now a plan to try to move the road so that eventually that keyhole can be used by more aircraft more times.

Interviewer: Would that keyhole need to be expanded in the process?

Von Hagel: No, it can stay right where it's at. Let's give you an example. In its condition right now, the runway is just off to the West of that runway in. So, an airplane taking off to the East, the road behind doesn't matter. You can take off to the East and use the entire length of that runway and out. But if you're going, taking off to the West, you can't use that entire length of the runway because that keyhole is actually lower than the road. So, you went to the physical end of that keyhole. You don't have enough time to get elevated.

So, we have to subtract runway distance. It's all on paper. So, the pilot knows when he's taking off towards the road, he has to subtract a certain amount of runway from the

runway length. And that's how much runway he's allowed to use. When we move all 41 or relocated, and we regrade all that out, then he can use the full length of the runway. Again, and we don't have to rebuild what may have been taken out if we had gone through at that point bland in the beginning.

Interviewer: I see. So, I assume, too, that the extension of the runway allows for larger aircraft.

Von Hagel: Yeah. What it does. And that's one of the things I had to communicate to the community back in 1993. And it's the same conversation we're having now. It's just the next phase of it, is the longer runways don't accommodate larger aircraft per se. The reason we extend the runway is because the larger aircraft are already using the airport. They're already here in order to meet the standards and the requirements that we need to put in place. And for those airplanes to be used to their full operational ability is we need to extend the runway to accommodate those airplanes that are already using the airport today. So, for example, Gulfstream V, that's our new aircraft. Gulfstream V already comes into the airport. Gulfstream V can land on our existing runway and take off on our existing runway, just fine.

But the Gulfstream V right now on a summer day, when it's hot, can't carry as much fuel as it could on a cold day. So, when you can't carry as much fuel where that Gulfstream V might've been able to fly 7,000 miles on a full tank, maybe because of length of our runway on a very hot day, can only fly 5,000 miles or 4,000 miles. Because he has to leave weight behind because the weight is how much... The weight and the temperature are important as to how much runway he needs. And what we don't want in the county is we don't want the possibility of losing a company. Who's interested in creating jobs or relocating jobs to Cobb County? Who has a Gulfstream V or similar airplane? Who regularly flies I'm making up stuff to Hawaii or Europe, and they have a G-5. One of their criteria is to move their company is we need a place for our Gulf stream five, and we need to be able to take off all year round and go to Europe.

They come to Cobb County and say, "Hey, everything looks good. The only problem is in the summertime when it's 85 degrees or hotter, we can't carry enough fuel to get to Europe." But is airport over here? Is there a port over here in Alabama. They got everything we need. And they got a long enough runway that we can do it. So yeah, we can operate out of your airport eight times out of 10, not a problem, but it's those two times. And the last thing we want to do is we buy these expensive jets that get us from point A to point B. The last thing we want to do is we have to stop somewhere and get fuel before we take off and go to Europe.

I shared that with the community. I said, "When you're looking at your flights when you go on your business trips or vacations, how many times do you look at? There's a non-stop and there is a one or a two-stop." And you say, "Oh, I'll take the one stop when there's a non-stop available." "Well, no, you always take the non-stop. You don't want to have to stop and kill the time because it takes so much longer."

Well, if you've got a \$50 million jet and you have two airports in front of you and one of them to get Europe, you have to take a one-stop, in one you can go direct. Where do you think you're likely to put your plane and put your tax dollars? So, you're going to go to where it's a direct fly. So all of that to say, so now we look at the runway extension that we're looking at the runway extension to accommodate the aircraft we already have on the airport, and to make sure that those aircraft could be used to their full capability and they don't have a reason to go somewhere else. And any new aircraft that come, they see that we're doing what we need to do to accommodate the full usefulness of their airplanes and the future airplanes that are going to come out.

Interviewer: Well, do you see yourself more in competition with that airport in Alabama or the ones that are in the Metro Atlanta region?

Von Hagel: So, I think the Metro Atlanta airports and us, we all have a good working relationship because frankly, none of us are out trying to take aircraft from their airports. If you think about it, it's Charlie Brown's down the street. If Home Depot's based at Charlie Brown. Well, if we go down there and we get Home Depot to move to Cobb County, what have we done? We've merely taken airplanes that were already in Atlanta, a company that's already hiring people in Atlanta, and we're just moving their aircraft from one airport to another. So, the economic impact directly to the airport, it helps the airport, but it doesn't help the community. So, I think all of us in the Metro Atlanta area have the same concept is, "Hey, some of that's going to happen. Home Depot may want to move."

If Home Depot really wants to get out of Charlie Brown and come to Cobb County, that's fine. Nobody's going to not let them do that, but it doesn't change anything for the state or the Atlanta area. We'd rather have companies that are outside the Metro area, bringing new jobs and new opportunities into the area. Because even down at Charlie Brown, we support Charlie Brown.

Charlie Brown builds new hangers, and they bring new jobs. Charlie Brown's on the other side of the river from Cobb County. I can guarantee that some of the people that work at whatever that business is are going to live in Cobb County and that bringing jobs to Cobb County. So, it's all about economic activity. Shifting money inside the family doesn't do a whole lot.

Interviewer: Are there any notable companies or corporations that you could mention that are based here in the same way that Home Depot is based at Charlie Brown?

Von Hagel: Yeah, we have NCR corporation is based here. Clorox, local business operations are based here. Who else might we know? Georgia State Patrol, Aviation Division is based here. There's lots and lots of companies, not all of them recognizable. They're not all recognizable household names, but those are some of the bigger ones.

Interviewer: Being based here just in layman's terms, does that mean that CEOs and folks on the higher level are flying in and out, or is there more to it than that flying in someone. VIP, I mean, is there more to it than that?

Von Hagel: Yeah. What folks need to understand about general aviation is... And I mentioned earlier about a \$50 million jet. So, these aircraft can go anywhere from the low end, \$75,000, maybe up to \$75 million spent on a jet. No matter what aircraft it is that a company has, it is a tool that they use. And the expense of that is justified. Be it through time, savings, convenience even direct costs. If you've got a group of people, if I got a group of 10 people and I need to get them, and that's a short I got to fly in two days, the commercial airline tickets might be out of this world for me to fly 10 people someplace on a short notice. So, a jet can really pay off and not only the direct economic opportunity the time.

So, if you've got 10 people, you've got to get somewhere. You look at the airline schedules. You want to fly. I want them to go out at six o'clock in the morning. So, they get to Iowa by 8:30. Well, airlines don't work that way. Airline might fly at 10 o'clock and take five hours or six hours to do what a direct flight is, two hours there. And then you can't get those 10 people back home. They all got to stay in hotels, and they got to fly back the next day, five or six hours. And you lost a whole day's production of 10 people. So, you start to look at the whole package, and these people, these companies go, "All right, you know what? \$50 million jet just save me 10 people's productivity, and you multiply that." Over how many times a year do we need to fly? And all of a sudden, it starts to make economic sense.

So, it goes all the way. The people that fly on these planes are CEOs. They will go to sales folks, these folks that's part of what they do is if you've got really big contracts, people want face to face contact, and sometimes they want face to face contact away from everybody else. So, they'll get in the jet fly, pick somebody up. Who's a big client or a big contract, and they'll go somewhere where they can have a one-on-one meeting a weekend, whatever to finalize contracts in there.

We've got companies out here that take their whole team. NCR Corporation, worldwide company, has to be responsive worldwide. If there's a big event, a government challenge upheaval somewhere, they have to sometimes get people from Atlanta to wherever in the world that upheaval is so that they can make plans and situations to protect their assets or get people out quickly.

Now it goes all the way down, and that's big corporations, but it can go all the way down to doctors and lawyers and real estate agents. So, if you go a little more local, the smaller airplanes, I can be a doctor or a real estate agent. I can have a business here in Atlanta. It takes... What does it take like six hours to drive to, let's say Brunswick or Savannah, four and a half, five hours to Savannah. It can take that. I can fly that in about an hour in a little plane.

So, if I've got an office in Atlanta and I've got another office in the Savannah, and I've got my pilot's license, I can just drive out here. And within an hour, within a commute time that it takes me to get down to Hartsfield, normally to get a flight, I could have flown myself all the way to Savannah and do my office Thursday and Friday in Savannah, fly back here for the weekend. And I worked Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Marietta. Hop in the plane Thursday and Friday I'm doing my dental work down there as a dentist in Savannah.

Interviewer: So, it is moving people. I mean, pretty much exclusively. Obviously, it's not cargo.

Von Hagel: Well, we don't have any cargo planes based here. We accommodate cargo planes, though. We've had several 737 M-DADAs, C-130s, that have come in, especially during COVID pandemic. We've had a lot of cargo come and go because of the supply chain has been constricted, and we're seeing some larger aircraft come in with cargo. And I think I don't... We had many really figure out exactly where it all is or what it is, and they're not sharing the information with us, but they don't need to. And that's the other part of general aviation is there's a sense of safety, security, and sensitivity to it.

So, you're at your business. Who you got on that plane, and what products you got on that plane. Because there is a lot of corporate spying is the right word, but interest. There's a lot of competitive corporate interests where the corporate airplanes of the other companies that your competitor are flying to and who's getting products. And what kind of products are they getting so that they can accordingly pay attention. Where maybe is this hardware chain flying to a lot, and they maybe are opening some stores in that location. And the other hardware chain might notice that their corporate airplanes keep flying into this community. What's going on there? Check out that community. So that sort of thing, I think, goes on behind the scenes.

Interviewer: Well, with the pandemic, have you seen a decrease in the people traffic?

Von Hagel: We've actually seen an increase. So, with the airlines having restricted their schedules, they've grounded so many airplanes with the restricted schedules, with the safety concern for personal health safety, and with the limitations on the amount of people they could put on airplane. So, the capacity. All of those things are driving some people to general aviation. So, we're seeing more charter-type activity, people that probably maybe wouldn't have normally flown but have said, "You know what? When we talk about, if I got 10 people, I got to get to Iowa," and there's only one flight out of Hartsfield to Iowa that's not going to work. So, we need to do a charter or something. So, we're seeing quite a bit more activity than we had been.

The industry is seeing kind of a two-phased recovery by airports. Seems like metropolitan airports are doing very well. There's actually a lot of activity, lot of corporate and jet flying and personal flying. But we're seeing the rural or the second-tier airports out in the plane's kind of thing. We're seeing those airports much slower to

return. They're still less activity. And we surmise. I don't think anybody's done any studies yet, but we surmise that where the wealth is around the Metro areas. Those are the folks that have more of the opportunity to charter airplanes than if you go out into the rural areas. There may not be that concentration of wealth that people are just going to go chartering airplanes or have their own airplanes as much.

Interviewer: I see. Well, let's sort of return to the roles of staff here at the airport. So, when you first came, remind me how many folks were here.

Von Hagel: So, when I first arrived in 1993, there was airport manager, which was me, and we had one maintenance person on staff. So, maintenance person would take care of essentially everything outside you could think of, the pavement, the grass, wildlife control. We've got about seven miles worth of lights here. So taking care of the light system cutting trees, everything that needs to be done essentially outside and the airport manager was responsible for all the development, the planning, the intergovernmental relations, the coordination with the county and the oversight of construction and oversight of contracts and leases and everything you could picture that actually doesn't require having a tool in your hand.

Today we have staff on the airport of five people. So, we've got now three maintenance personnel that take care of the airfield still essentially do the same duties. There's just more property to take care of. And we take care of the property better than we used to at a higher standard. We were talking about whether we used to be a rural airport, and we converted into a corporate airport, and a corporate airport has higher needs than a rural airport.

So, we were up to three employees for maintenance, and then we've hired an operations manager. And the operations manager split the duties that the old airport manager used to do. So, the old airport manager would take care of all of the pilot, the events, the interactions with the tenants, along with all of the administrative and the planning and the contractual requirements.

Now the operations manager handles all the interactions with the tenants, oversees the construction, assures during events that the plans are all in place to keep everybody safe. The coordination with the control tower on the daily activities, where the airplanes may park more or less, or if we've got a piece of pavement, it's going to be down for maintenance. How are we going to work around that piece of pavement? And then, the airport manager focuses on the big picture, on gathering the plans, implementing the plans, new business opportunities, finding the money, developing the projects, getting the contracts. Once we get it to contract, then it's handed over to operations, says, "Okay, we've got a new taxiway common we got it all set up. Here you go, work with the contractor now." So now you're in the field. How's it going to work in the field when you close its pavement down. When workers got to get from point A to point B and do it all safely?

Interviewer: I see. So, you mentioned the five. So, for the two gentlemen who work out of the flight control tower, who were they employed by?

Von Hagel: So, the airport set up such that the county owns the airport and operates the airport. And the county has the five employees we just spoke about here. One airport manager, one operations manager, and three maintenance employees. The airport employees are responsible for the big picture, the public areas, and the development and the safety of the facility. The aircraft now on the airport, there are about 300 people that come to work every day, only five of them are county employees. The other 250 people work for other agencies or other private businesses. So, the FBO, which provides all the services to the aircraft, fuel, hangers, storage, that sort of thing. They run their own business and responsible for their own hiring. They have a lease with the county. So that lease has operation requirements that they have to fulfill. Minimum levels of service they need to provide. And they're out there for profit running their business.

So, the five airport employees don't have to deal with providing the services to the aircraft this private business does. There's other private businesses that do aircraft maintenance, avionics work. There's a restaurant on the airport. There's cleaning airplanes, but anything you can think of.

Interviewer: Flight instructions.

Von Hagel: Flight instructions, another big one. Aircraft rides. So, there's all these activities that go on. They're all by private businesses. They all have leases on the airport that require them to conduct services at a certain amount. They all pay fees to the county. And that's what operates the airport on the big picture. This is where I get our revenue is from those operators. And those operators collected from their customers.

So, one other government agency is the FAA. So, the FAA is actually in charge of the airspace of controlling the airplanes that are flying, not the airport. So, the FAA hires a contractor to run the control tower, and those contractors are controllers here, work for a contractor that's hired by the FAA to run our facility. That's not unusual. In the United States, there are about 500 control towers, and the FAA has chosen to go out and hire contractors to run it at 250 of them. So, about half, the control towers are run by a contractor. Half of them are run by the government direct employees. The reason they go to the contractor is they can run a contract tower for about 60% of the cost of FAA employees in the tower.

Interviewer: I see. So, the first tower that was built after you came, when was the decision made? Why was the decision made to replace it with the one that was completed in 2016?

Von Hagel: 2015 or '16. Yeah. So, the first tower came about because of the amount of activity we had. And it was a safety concern that there was just too many airplanes all at one time in the sky. And it was a procedure that the FAA has in place when you don't have a control tower to be communicate and be seen. And so, there's standard rules, and they

used, but once you get too many airplanes up there, it doesn't work very well. So, we had too many airplanes. So, the decision was made by the county as part of our master plan that was developed to install a control tower. At that time, the control tower had to be funded by local resources. So, we had a budget of about \$300,000, and we had to figure out how we were going to build a control tower for \$300,000.

So, we went through the process. We ended up building a control tower for near that cost, a very simple tower, very small. But it sufficed to do its job. As we continued to grow and as more and more equipment as we grew, the FAA provided us more and more equipment. We started to get radar. We started to get flight strip computers. We started to get weather computers. We started to get what they call them, computers, communication. So, we get all these electronics was coming in, and we were busting at the seams that we actually, we couldn't put any more wires up our conduits from the bottom equipment room to the top cap floor.

So, we were going outside with equipment. So, at one point, we're trying to encourage new business development at the airport, a new aircraft to come. And we would talk about how wonderful the airport was and how engaged we were in making it the best airport in the country. And then, as soon as we drove by the control tower, you saw this little facility made out of cinder blocks with conduit on the outside, holding wires, and always we got to do something. So, it all kind of came together, aesthetics, impression, marketing, and operational. We were just playing out a room.

So, we ended making a deal with the FAA that normally you get a grant for 90% federal, 5% state, and 5% local. Well, we ended up making a deal that we would do a 50 50 grant, and then we would pay for half the cost of a new control tower.

Commissioner chairman Tim Lee, at the time, I think this was the first project he funded after we came out of the 2008 recession. We didn't have any capital improvements for years because of the budget cuts from the recession. And when we had our first surplus at the end of a fiscal year, the control tower was the first project he put money into. And we used that money to leverage the FAA, to give us half the funding we needed. And that ended up constructing a \$3 million control tower. And it just went from there. So, this control tower is your modern control tower built to all the requirements you would expect in a control tower. And it wasn't built on a shoestring.

Interviewer: And it can... I mean, it would be suitable as far out into the future, as you can see.

Von Hagel: That's right. As far as we can see, it's got enough conduit space, enough floor space to accommodate any future development that we can envision right now.

Interviewer: Excellent. So, we've gone through most of the questions I have. I do have some questions about... And I don't even know what the term for this is, but those who keep their planes here all the time. So, what number of-

Von Hagel: Based customers?

Interviewer: Based customers, do you have?

Von Hagel: So, we have approximately 300 aircraft that are based here. I mean, this is their home. About 60 of those are jets. Another 30 or 40 are turboprops. And the other 200 are piston airplanes, either singles or twins here.

Interviewer: And you don't oversee that there are other entities.

Von Hagel: Yes.

Interviewer: That you were mentioning.

Von Hagel: I don't have any agreements directly with any aircraft. So, all of those aircraft go through one of those businesses that we mentioned earlier, the FBO or a flight school or something to that effect are the ones that take care of all those airplanes.

Interviewer: I see. And can you talk a little bit about, in the time that you've been here, you mentioned that that first strategic plan that you were building on from the previous manager, how successful do you feel you've been in fulfilling that? I mean, I would assume, based on what you've said, that it was a high degree of success, and now you're moving on and what's your sort of metric of success now, as you think about the airport's future.

Von Hagel: So, we had a very high level of success. The first master plan. We accomplished all of its goals, and we entered into a second master plan to look towards the future. And what the future changed in where are the vision? Because before you could change in your master plan, you want to have a vision. What are you looking at? Why are you looking at a new master plan? Maybe we accomplished the first one, and you're done. And you just kind of keeping the status quo.

Well, what we saw changing was international traffic and the size of the corporate aircraft. The world is realistically getting smaller and smaller. Businesses need to travel. There are more worldwide businesses today than there ever happened. So, businesses need to leave the country and do business wherever they make their resources because you've got the United States has matured as an economic engine.

So, if you want to do some real heavy growth in your company, you have to look outside the United States. So, we were seeing airplanes here leaving here, going international. And we didn't have a customs facility here, so they couldn't come back here directly. They had to stop somewhere, clear customs, and then come back here. And we talked about, you always want to have a nonstop flight. So, we're able to get customs on the airport. And we said, "You know what, we're missing something here that we need to look in our plans. Is our plan heading us the right direction, or is our status quo the right

thing to do with all of these large corporate jets that can fly farther than jets can ever fly before?" And they're doing one-stops to come back here. Do we need to readdress our plan?

So that's when we sat down, and we came up with the new master plan for the new aircraft accommodated, the next generation of airplanes. So, we're just in the beginning of implementing that. We've got the plan. We're doing the environmental work right now. And if everything goes well, we'll actually start implementing plan with construction in the next year or two. And we'll start to see some changes from that. That really wasn't your question. What was the beginning of that question there? Did you remember?

Interviewer: Well, I mean-

Von Hagel: Sort of, but you were kind of hidden at something else, and I left on you.

Interviewer: Wow. Well, I'm just interested... Well, the master plan, you said you had completed the first one successfully. And what was your sort of plan for the future, and how do you sort of measure the success of your plans? I think you spoke to it.

Von Hagel: Yeah. I know where other part was. So how do I measure the success of the airport in general? And in general, the numbers we like to use is our economic impact that we have on the community. We talked about if an airplane out of here does 10 touch and goes round in the circle, or they just come by and visit and leave. What does that do for the community? Well, not a tremendous amount.

But we do studies every 10 years to measure the economic impact of the airport. And when I came in 1993, the airport had an economic impact to the community of \$12 million a year. So, every year, the airport was generating \$12 million of activity in the community. We just completed, the state actually completed it, just completed an update of the study. And in 2020, we had an economic impact of \$134 million a year. And we have nearly thousand jobs that are reliant on the airport activity. Meaning that if the airport were to close tomorrow, if aviation was deemed illegal in the United States, closed the airports, we would see a thousand jobs in the community disappear in a short period of time because the activity that goes on here every day wouldn't be there to support everything that goes out. Immediately, you would find about 300 people out of a job because they had to work directly on the airport.

Interviewer: Who were those others do-

Von Hagel: The others are the fuel drivers. The fuel drivers, the real estate agents that support, the grocery store attendance that you need to be hired to service 300 people. The hotels that hire people, because the people fly in here, stay at hotels. All the economy would just shrink, and you would see 1000 jobs not needed because the activity had

decreased. You don't need as many waiters. You don't need as many veterinarians, all of those types of activities.

Interviewer: Well, early on in the interview, you said that the county was interested in the airport success when you came. And that was something that was good. When I spoke to Mr. Brown, he said when he came in the 70s, in addition to local residents not liking it, there may have been less interest from the county. Can you talk about that trajectory and what you know about that?

Von Hagel: Yeah, what I know about the tip pre me, so pre 1993, the county and the airport had a challenging relationship. And it was a lot to do with the community and the noise and the commissioners, not knowing how to deal with it. All they got was complaints. Airplanes make noise. Last thing we want to do is make more noise. Because it'd be just more complaints, so let's try to just control as much as we can, what's happening in the airport and let's not do anything with it. And they actually shrunk the plan. So, the original master plan back pre-Sam Smith back before the first airport manager had the airport about double the size of what it is today. There's a FedEx facility on the south side of the airport. That was all proposed to be part of an airport expansion.

Interviewer: Wow.

Von Hagel: So, it would add two runways. It would add a large area of development for airplanes and hangers at businesses. Well, the county commissioners at the time in the '80s cut the master plan in half and did away with all future planning development and set the airport is what the airport is. Let's freeze it right here and abandoned all plans. And they even gave grant money back. I understand that they had in hand to buy property to improve the airport, and they returned the money and didn't buy the property.

So, the airport was hamstrung in that master plan that Sam Smith came up with was to accommodate within the existing boundaries as best we could, all of the activity, making it as safe and accommodate the aircraft that were already using the airport as best as we could. So, that was the hamstrungness.

When I say the airport was very supported by the commissioners and the county was of that hamstrung master plan. So, they were very supportive of making the airport is safe and accommodate as much as it could within its existing footprint. And we're willing to put the money into it to make that happen.

But we had missed the boat in the previous decade where the airport really could have made even more tremendous impact on the community as far as economic development than it is today. If there was the room to expand because today, we're 100% occupied. We're very limited in what kind of space we have that we can try to put hanging to. We can put hangers right now. What we're looking at is not the most desirable places. It's just the leftover places. We're 100% occupied, which means today, if a customer comes into the county and says, "I want to build a factory, I'm going to

bring 2000 people. I need an airport that I can fly to Europe, and I can fly to Mexico City direct. Here, you've got that. Let's do it. I need a hanger to put my airplane in." And we say, "Well, we can do all of that, but we can't do the hanger. We might have a hanger for you one day. We'll put you on the waiting list. And when somebody leaves, we'll call you."

We're going to lose 1500 to 2000 jobs because we didn't have any place to put the airplane. And if the county commission in the 1980s had held onto that property, then we would have property that we could have been developing as needed. And we could keep the economic impact growing. So right out, we're going to have a challenging time making the next 10-year number higher than the current year's number because we're built out.

Interviewer: So, it has to do with this change down at the west end. That's one possible part of the master plan too?

Von Hagel: It's one element-

Interviewer: But it doesn't speak to these other issues you're talking.

Von Hagel: That's correct. That's part of the safety issue in making the accommodate the airplanes that are here, that they don't go away. But the other side of that is now interesting is we're trying to buy some warehouses for this and this master plan because we have to move a taxiway to accommodate the larger wingspan. So, we had to move a taxi way out, which means we have to buy. Actually, we have to buy the property that the commission gave the money back for in the 1980s, which they were going to buy the property. I think the number I heard was for a million dollars today to buy those same properties back to do this next Master plan. We're looking in the neighborhood of \$50 million. Times change.

Interviewer: So, to wrap up, can you tell me a little bit about your plans for the future? How long you envision yourself in the position that I know was not one you saw as permanent when first came?

Von Hagel: Yeah, that's right. This was when I first came in '93. This was going to be a fun airport and exciting airport. I was looking forward to doing all the work, and then after five to seven years, I would look for the next airport and grow as an airport manager. But what really, I got lucky with is this airport grew and just kept growing. And there wasn't a better airport to go to. This was the airport that I wanted. And where we're at today is not the airport. We were at 1993. So anywhere I would have gone, I would have been trying to apply for the airport that we had just become.

So, I just loved Cobb County had no interest in leaving Cobb County. And luckily, we just grew up together, and it's been really, really good. So, I've been here 20, I think, eight years, something like that, like 28 years. I expect to be here another two years or so.

And then it'll be just a decision on whether I really still enjoy coming to work every day, or whether a family. I'd rather enjoy more time with the family. We'll just figure that out in two years, but I think two years is a definite, and then we'll just play it by ear from there.

Interviewer: And what do you see as your legacy?

Von Hagel: I don't see... I tell you what, here's a good way to put this. Everybody congratulates me on how wonderful the airport's become, and it's a beautiful airport, and you've done this, and you've done that. And I always say, "Look, I never had a shovel in my hand. I never drove a bulldozer. I don't know how to work an AutoCAD machine to design anything. My role has been just to put the right people together to understand what our goals are and to be the cheerleader, the coach, the manager, the kick butter, whatever it has to do to get a whole team of people together to get to the end game." So, I don't have a license. I love the airport. And I guess if anything, you got to pick it. I just want to say in that a really neat airport, Karl worked there for quite a while. And helped help shape it.

But there's no like arrogance that I built all this. I mean, without the commission, without the engineers, without the contractors, without the tenants, without the pilots, all bringing good ideas to the table. And I just get to pick what seems to be the best idea. I've find the easiest job of everybody is just, "Yeah, that's the way we need to go." And in a community that was just growing tremendously. So, it was just keeping up with it. Anyway, so I guess that's my long-winded answer to what my legacy would be. My legacy hopefully is my five daughters and that they're good citizens and good people. And I had something to do with that.

Interviewer: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Karl Von Hagel, and we'll conclude there.

Von Hagel: Thanks.