

Grand Rapids – Itasca County Airport (GPZ)

Gordy Newstrom Field

1500 7th Avenue South East
Grand Rapids, Minnesota 55744
(218) 326-0893
UNICOM 122.8 MHz

Airport History

Grand Rapids – Itasca County Airport was opened in 1933 as a grass strip by Ted Tinquist, Sr. Mr. Tinquist was giving flight training and managed the airport. In nearby Coleraine, MN Gordon “Gordy” Newstrom was also running a flight school which he began after being discharged from training Naval Air Cadets in 1944. This flight school had grown to 100 students following the years after World War II. That same year Gordy Newstrom founds Mesaba Airlines in Coleraine, Minn. Taking its name from the American Indian word for “soaring eagle.” Mesaba has one plane, purchased for \$1,300 and used to shuttle employees of the Blandin Paper Company from Grand Rapids, Minn., to the Twin Cities. By 1949 the Grand Rapids flight school had slacked off. During that year, Newstrom had made a deal with Tinquist, and by 1950 Newstrom closed the Coleraine airport and moved operations to the Grand Rapids Airport becoming the Airport Manager.

By this time the Grand Rapids operation had grown from two Piper Cubs to six aircraft, which included a five-place bi-plane. In addition to the increased equipment, the staff had grown from one to four pilots and two mechanics. The early 1950’s also saw the beginnings of sea plane operations and flight training on Lily Lake when Newstrom installed plywood floats on one of his Cessna aircraft.

With the increased activity level and local airport demands the airport needed improvements and modernization. In 1953, the sod runway was paved to 4,100 feet.



Increased airport operations and improvements continued through the years and in 1967 through a joint powers agreement between the City of Grand Rapids and

County of Itasca formed a joint airport commission and renamed the airport from the Grand Rapids Municipal Airport to the Grand Rapids – Itasca County Airport. Since the time the Airport Commission has provided fiscal oversight and governance to the airport operation. The Halverson family of Duluth, who bought the Mesaba Airlines portion of the business from Newstrom in 1973, begins scheduled air service out of the Grand Rapids Airport.

By 1974 the airport consisted of:

- ✎ RWY 16/34; 100' x 4,100' paved and lighted.
- ✎ RWY 04/22; 150' x 3,050' turf.
- ✎ RWY 10/28; 150' x 2,470' turf.
- ✎ Seaplane Operations Area; 13 based seaplanes and maintenance facilities, take off/landing area approximately 1,800' in length.
- ✎ Apron Area; 97,000 square feet.
- ✎ 25,000 gallons of stored AVGAS.
- ✎ TVOR and Rotating Beacon.
- ✎ REILs on RWY 34.
- ✎ MIRLS in RWY 16/34.
- ✎ VOR.
- ✎ Instrument approaches available through Hibbing Flight Service Station.
- ✎ Civil Air Patrol Building; 2,500 square feet.
- ✎ Hangar and Shop; 8,000 square feet.
- ✎ Hangar and Administration building; 12,500 square feet.
- ✎ 10 Unit T-Hangar
- ✎ Large Hangar; 2,000 square feet
- ✎ Vehicle Parking Lot; 50 vehicles

From 1974 to 1980 there were no significant improvement to airport facilities, but from 1980 to 1991 the airport saw a significant number of changes/improvements. During these eleven years the airport received the following airside improvements:

- ✎ Aircraft parking and tie-down apron expanded to 285,000 square feet
- ✎ Taxiway extension and widening to meet runway needs.
- ✎ Construction of multiple hangars.
- ✎ Construction of an Airport Electrical Vault housing all airfield lighting controls.
- ✎ RWY 16/34 extended to 5,755' and overlaid with a porous friction coating.
- ✎ Construction of an Airport Maintenance Building.
- ✎ Acquisition of modern snow removal equipment.
- ✎ Acquisition of aircraft rescue and firefighting apparatus.
- ✎ In 1986 the airport was renamed to "Gordy Newstrom Field."

In 1978 Mesaba Airlines was sold to the Swenson family of Thief River Falls, Minn., who would take it public in 1982. The airline begins flying to Iowa, North Dakota and South Dakota, using a fleet of Beech 99s. In 1985 Mesaba Airlines moves its headquarters and maintenance base from Grand Rapids to Minneapolis while maintaining its air service link to the Grand Rapids Airport.

From 1991 to present day airport improvements have mainly consisted of the construction of facilities. Since 1991 the airport has added the following:

- ✎ Passenger terminal building.
- ✎ 2 additional t-hangar units; 18 bays. This construction also included the associated ramps and Taxilane construction.
- ✎ Deer proof perimeter fencing.



Mesaba Airlines continues to serve the Grand Rapids market until March 2004 when Northwest decided to discontinue the service provide by Mesaba. The Grand Rapids – Itasca County Airport was hit significantly hard following the nations economic down turn and the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks. Below are the Grand Rapids revenue passenger counts from 1982 to 2003:

	1982	1986	1989	1990	1993	1996	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003
Departing Passengers	2,078	3,100	7,500	6,966	6,669	7,401	10,037	10,246	8,619	7,187	6,596

Today and despite the loss of commercial air service the airport still sees over 20,000 annual aircraft operations and has nearly 80 based aircraft. The airport’s annual budget is over \$300,000 with half that coming from tenant and user fees. In the airport’s 5 year capital improvement program are the construction of another 10-unit “T” hangar, the paving of one of the turf crosswind runways and a possible extension of the main runway.