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# Airport director talks growth, future plans

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That bustling airport situated a five-minute drive east of Belgrade got a new name several years ago for a good reason, about two dozen community resident were told last week.

Brian Sprenger, director of Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport, gave a fact-packed presentation to attendees of the second Belgrade Conversations event at the Belgrade Community Library.

He didn't hesitate to explain "the most controversial part" of the airport's identity, the facility's being renamed from Gallatin Field to its current title. Discussion about a name that would better identify the airport market began about 10 years ago, at the same time the role of many airports was changing, he said.

The Bozeman airport operates as a self-governing entity, an airport authority, and, like other airports, it originally functioned similar to state transportation departments. Just as the Montana Department of Transportation provides roads and highways

for people to travel throughout the Treasure State, the airport's traditional role was to provide a place for airplanes to land and take off, Sprenger said.

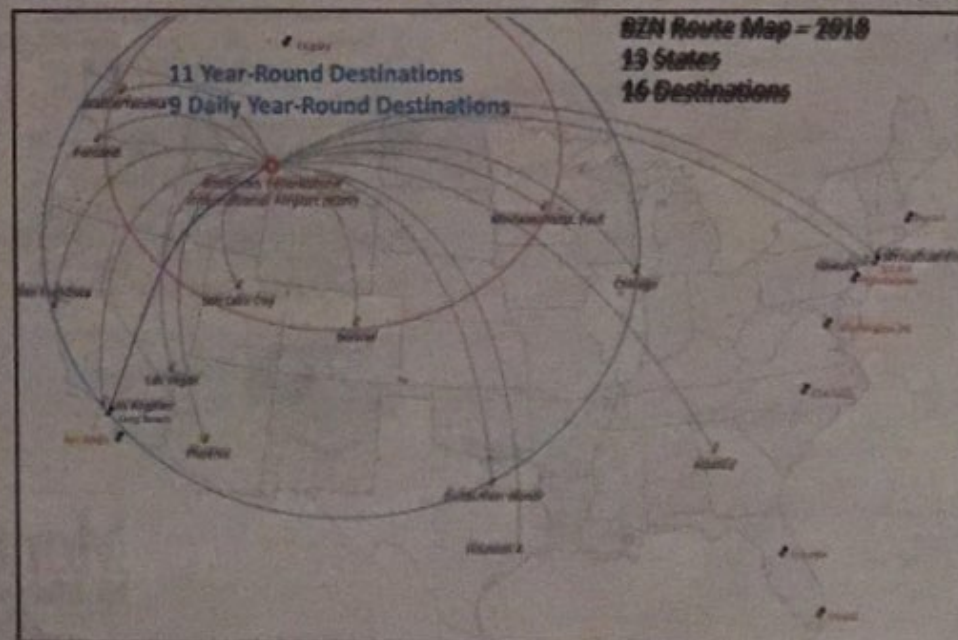
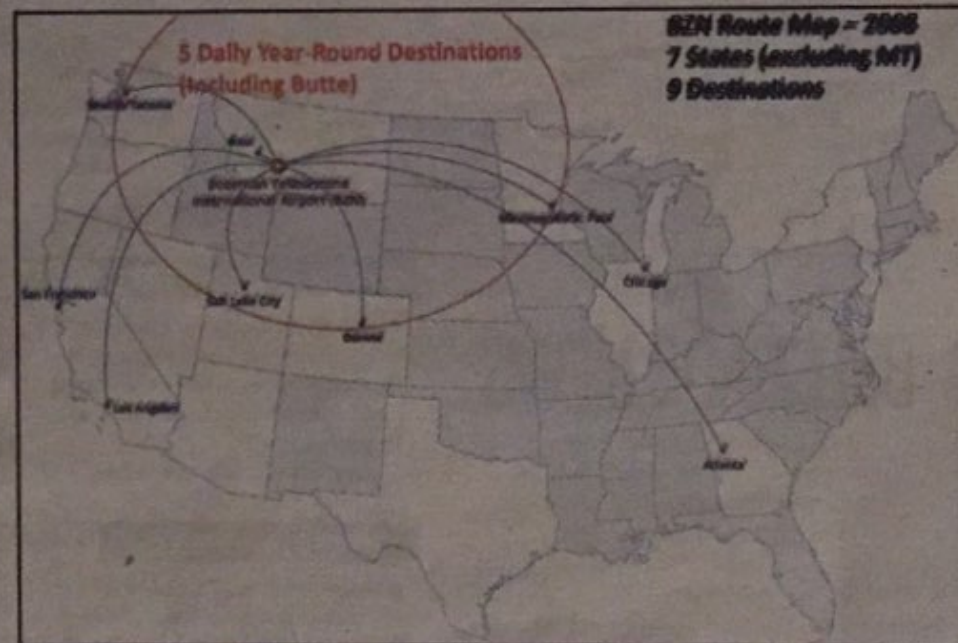
"That's pretty much how airports existed, and management of airports would pretty much say, OK, we've got this facility. If Airline A wants to come here, they will. If they don't, they won't. We don't care; we're just providing them a place for them to be."

Airports' functions started changing around the start of the 21st century when they began to be seen as "economic generators," he said. That meant airports began talking "aggressively or assertively" to airlines, trying to cajole them to add their terminals to their routes.

The airport began joining other area organizations, both government and business, such as chambers of commerce and tourism groups, as representatives of the community, trying to convince airlines to come into the Bozeman market and provide increased access to the rest of the U.S.

Sprenger realized it wasn't

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effective marketing to tell airlines he represented Gallatin Field.

People would look at him and say, "I don't know, does that even have an airport? Of course, you've got some jokesters who will say is that some baseball park?"

Other airports had to come up with different names to reflect their identity, too. Sprenger mentioned examples such as Denver, where Denver International Airport replaced Stapleton Field, and Fresno, Calif., the entry point to Yosemite National Park, which changed its name from Fresno Air Terminal to Fresno Yosemite International Airport.

"Notice anything similar there?" Sprenger asked.

"There were a lot of things going on that said whatever name we put out there, it needs to give us an identity that people will understand and find us," and Bozeman, as the local city with the largest population, needed to be in the name.

Also, officials saw an opportunity to bring a U.S. Customs office to the airport. Unlike international airports in the state's other large cities, which earlier landed customs offices paid for with federal funds, money from that source was no longer available to Bozeman. So if the airport here wanted "international" in its name, it would have to find another way to earn the credential.

"Flying into Bozeman, if you're flying a private aircraft, you have to pay for the use because the government's not going to pay for it for us," he said.

While the Bozeman airport does not have commercial international service and is not likely to have that for some time, it attracts growing traffic in private international flights.

After trying names that included Belgrade, Big Sky and Southwestern Montana, the airport became Bozeman Yellowstone International Airport at Gallatin Field, reflecting its long heritage. Even that proved too long, so Gallatin Field was dropped, although Sprenger

Among other topics, Sprenger mentioned:

- A perception that airplanes are flying lower over residential areas, which has come up in his conversations with directors of other airports. "The smaller regional jets, the smaller planes have been replaced with bigger airplanes, and so what people are seeing is the airplanes are flying the same height but they're so much bigger, it looks like they're a lot lower." Also, large jets flying longer distances require more fuel at takeoff, so the added weight does cause them to be at a lower initial altitude.

- Bozeman's lofty ranking among the country's airports. Excluding Florida and Charleston, S.C., Bozeman's air traveler count has grown faster than any of the remaining U.S. 150 airports during the past 10 years.

- Whether Southwest Airlines will enter the Bozeman market. Sprenger said he's been asked that question for 20 years, and "my answer has always been, not now. But we're getting closer." The challenge remains that Bozeman remains small, especially when the discount airline is considering service to markets such as Hawaii. Denver International's continued growth, though, could pay off for Bozeman because of the 30 new gates planned at DIA, 12 will be allocated to Southwest. So, a Bozeman-to-Denver route on Southwest may materialize.

said longtime residents of Gallatin Valley – he's one, having lived here 45 years – will always "pay homage" to the original name.

"I will say that, no matter what, the address for the Bozeman airport will always be Belgrade," he said.

A major goal was to make sure travelers find the airport when they search the Web on their computers, tablets and smartphones. Back in the 1990s, when Internet access started to become widespread, Gallatin Field officials registered several domains that included local places such as Yellowstone airport, Big Sky and Bozeman because "we didn't know where it was going, but we thought ahead," Sprenger said. Still, before the name change, Gallatin Field didn't show up on the first page of search results.