

Why is California City No Longer a “Glider Friendly” Airport?

California City Airport, a popular glider port for nearly 50 years, has been blessed with its easy access to the Sierras in the Mojave Desert and for sailplane training in a wide variety of metrological conditions and soaring methods, including thermalling, wave and ridge conditions. Only an hours drive from the Los Angeles area, it serves a large population for recreation in powered and unpowered aircraft and skydiving.

Glider services at Cal City have been extensive. On site glider repair and upgrade by a qualified AEP mechanic and trailer storage were available. Certified glider instructors and commercial pilots were available for public rides and training. Numerous individual and US sailplane records have been set from California City Airport. In 2013, Cal City “Southern Sierra” gliders, in a global on line competition, placed 2nd in the US and 3rd in the world. Gliders, operating without engines and requiring towplanes or winches for launch are unique.

Glider operations commence without the ability to self-taxi, takeoff or go-around, and take some study to understand the peculiar limitations, operational restrictions and safety procedures that this sport demands.

Beginning in 1965, California City mixed highly diverse warbird flying, movie set creations, parachute jumping and glider operations. Originally, with a single runway and no taxiway, all users had to mix sequencing on one runway. As years passed and improvements were made, a parallel partial taxiway was constructed. Studies were made by the FAA to endorse the operational plan (1977) developed by airport users to blend utility with safety for **all users**. Separate glider landing runways were constructed with FAA approval, and the westerly facing glider strip was paved prior to 1980. The below 1980 photo was taken after construction of the new parallel taxiway and before the terminal building was built.



California Airport, 1980, photo courtesy of Caracole Soaring

Owned by the City of California City, the California City Airport enjoyed a main runway and a parallel taxiway and nearly limitless flat caliche surfaces on which to land all aircraft, including a completely flat plane between the taxiways and the main runway. Gliders were launched by towing from the taxiway when there was no activity on the main runway. Without any elevated lights, the taxiway sides were obstacle free allowing safe passage for weathervaning gliders, aborts or ropebreaks (common occurrence). There also were two dedicated glider landing strips south of the taxiway and paralleling the main runway making the committed, powerless sailplane landings totally independent from all the other airport operations.



California City Airport, 7 Aug 2013, photo courtesy of ME Aviation

From this ideal configuration, 35 major annual glider SSA competitions were conducted, involving three to five towplanes and more than 65 sailplanes using this flat central area for tow plane maneuvering, marshalling and the glider runways for "relights" (early unplanned landings). It was an ideal sailplane airport for all aspects of primary and advanced glider training, private recreational objectives, record setting, competitive events and sport advancement. Three active glider clubs of about 50 members operated 9 sailplanes here. An estimated 14,000 towplane and glider operations were conducted in 1993. The below photo taken in 2000, shows 32 glider trailers and the large expanse of flat caliche between the main runway and parallel taxiway.



Cal City Glider Operations, mid 2000, photo courtesy of Caracole Aviation

Over the decades, various persons served as Airport Manager for the City, sometimes it was the skydive business operator, but it became a full-time staff position. Intermittently, the staffer had ideas wishing to change the operational protocol. Airport users always opposed these 'improvements'. Tom Weil arrived as manager in **1998**.

An FAA Airfield Improvement Program (AIP) grant was procured by Tom Weil to solve a "drainage problem". The problem was mud flow in heavy rains, requiring city graders to scrape off mudflow from the east end cross taxiway and runway threshold. This mud removal was a half day effort, perhaps three times a year, for one city worker. Pilots simply taxied across or around the dried mud. No airport users wanted this "improvement" and stated so at the time. To remedy the "safety issue", in 2002, an AIP project for **\$510,000** created a drainage ditch, concrete abutments, 'standard signage' and culverts, rendering the infield unusable for sailplanes and airplanes.

In discussion with the glider operator, they were reassured that the drainage would be a mild, shallow bevel to the infield, allowing aircraft to roll safely off taxiways, or runways in high winds or in emergency situations. The lowest elevation would be no more than eighteen inches below the taxiway. When final drawings were released for contract, the ditch was THREE feet deep at midfield, and deeper at the

east end, to accommodate the new culverts under taxiways. The project created such high water flow rates, it needed cross-sand bags to pool the water. The flow carried mud to fill the culverts, requiring the fire department to clear culverts with the pumper and four men, five times annually. The fire department has discontinued their support. The road department needed to regrade the steep bevels adjacent to the taxiways to fill the edge erosion deep cutouts, multiple man-day efforts.



Mid Field Erosion After \$500K AIP Centerfield Drainage Ditch Completed photos courtesy of Caracole Soaring

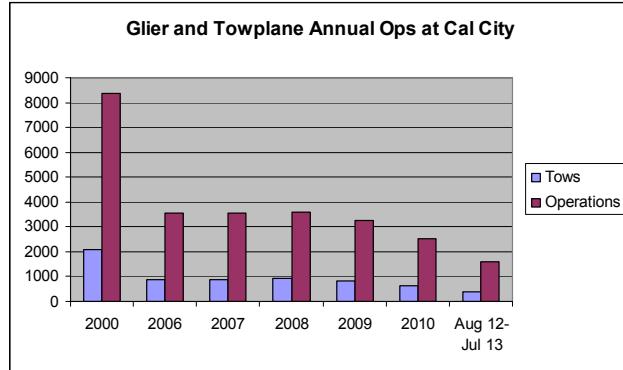
Three aircraft are known to have been damaged due to this project, as predicted by the airport users. One tail-dragger veered off the main runway and struck the sandbags doing gear damage following a tire failure. One Piper taxied off the east bound taxiway into an erosion cut at night and suffered gear, propeller and engine damage while serving the medi-vac operation contracted by the City. The fire department responded and watered his airplane. One owner-training Fouga jet swerved from Runway 24 through the ditch, across to the taxiway, and then recovered and returned to the main runway, doing gear, wingtip and tail cone damage. The Fouga incident was not a reportable "accident" in FAA definition.

Due to costs, efforts to clear the culverts ceased and they filled with sand now leaving the airfield not only with the original drainage "problem" but with an unusable trenched, eroded and tumble-weed infield, unusable in any emergency.



Abandoned Sand filled Culverts Return Airfield to Original Drainage Problem
Photos courtesy ME Aviation

Glider operations at California City immediately decayed. There were no longer Regional Competitions sanctioned by the SSA. Fewer student training flights occurred. Sailplane owners moved their sailplanes to more "glider friendly" airports. Club activities waned and many of the sailplanes were sold. A damaged sailplane from Caracole Soaring was not replaced. Only those highly competitive sailplane pilots remained.



Glider annual operations have decreased 80% since 2000
 but still represent 70% of Cal City aircraft operations, calculations from tow plane records and tach hours,
 ME Aviation

Tom Weil returned California City in about 2007 from his position as Mojave Airport Business Manager to become the City Manager. There is little corporate memory at the new City Council of the history or permitting and glider operations at Cal City airport. Mr. Weil needs the glider flight operations to justify his applications for Federal grant funds. He openly pushes for AIP projects that would upgrade the airport to support more commercial operations similar to Mojave. He deactivated the California City Airport Advisory Board in 2008 that was comprised of seasoned glider and power interests on the airfield and from the city. He conceived of airport commercial operation At Cal City similar to Mojave and defined it through un-staffed AIP applications. The proposed AIP projects for a 60,000 psi glider runway and an 80,000 psi southern taxiway do not meet current FAA runway separation criteria and would require more airfield space purchased by the city to accommodate a new runway and parallel taxiway, unless the two glider strips were eliminated. The current runway is rated only at 26,000 psi. Furthermore the combined takeoff and landing operations from a single glider runway are operationally inefficient and problematic.

The city needed to rent its purchase of Van Pray's hangar complex. Norm Hill Aviation moved into the west end of the airfield in 2012 and was allowed to park and salvage deregistered Gulfstream 2 aircraft in the approach safety zone for glider runway 06. While this is a clear safety hazard to landing gliders and towplanes, Mr. Weil refused to review the situation in response to a request from the local glider operator, ME Aviation in July 2012. The quiet word out was "don't complain or you will lose your glider runways."



Cal City Airport, Landing Views, photos courtesy ME Aviation

Mr. Weil created and submitted an AIP project that would demolish the west end of the taxiway and convert to a 5000 ft 60,000 psi dual wheel "glider runway" without discussing the operational needs or concept with the local glider operator. The author believes and has requested FOIA information that might explain why the CalTrans inspector, Daniel Gargas, created rationale to order closing of the two glider strips, and have a letter sent to the City Council on 14 May 13 directing them to do so. Disturbingly, CalTrans used direct intimidation

by stating that continuing glider operations on the glider strips or taxiway would be “a violation of State law”. The justification included in the letter claimed that the glider runways and taxiway operations were “never permitted” and the glider runways “were non standard and failing to meet safety standards.” The letter directed that “the glider runways must be permanently dismantled so they are no longer discernable as landing surfaces” and that all glider operations “use Runway 6/24 in sequence with other general aviation traffic.”



**Sailplanes marshalling on ramp area for RW 06/24 departures
Note sailplane in rearview mirror of towplane and X on glider runway 24**
Photo courtesy of ME Aviation, Aug 2013

Subsequent research revealed that there were Cal Trans issued permits in 2002 and temporary permits in 2008 that prohibited tow operations from the taxiway, and the 2008 changed the permanent glider runways to “temporary”. In fact the expiration of the 2008 temporary permit returned the permit to the original 2002 permit, which included takeoff (albeit unfeasible) and landing operations from the glider runways. None of these permits were provided to the local glider operations so unpermitted tow operations from the taxiway operated without interruption until August 2013. In 2002, the FAA conducted a Surveillance Study of the glider operations on the taxiway and two glider runways and were “highly satisfactory” without any “surface accident or incident” history.

Both CalTrans allegations on permit history and safety (runway separation criteria) were proven to be false, but only *after* glider runways were closed and glider operations were forced to share the main runway with powered traffic on August 6, 2013, with all the inherent hazards and operational limits and inefficiencies. The local glider operator, ME Aviation appealed the decision to Mr. Jeff Brown, Cal Trans Chief of Airports on 22 Aug 13 and no action has been taken to date. A summary of the degradation of glider operational needs is shown below. Note the movement of **Green (Good Capability)** operations to **Red (Unacceptable)** glider operations.

Issues for Glider Operations Restricted to Main Runway				
KEY	Glider Operational Needs		Previously Permitted two landing strips and takeoffs from taxiway	All Gider Ops from main runway (current)
	Towed Departures	Simuntaneous multi glider staging	10 + gilders, 2 minute intervals	Single glider only, each takes 6-9 minutes
		Safe Rope break/ abort Procedure	Either sailplane or towpalne can safely exit taxiway left or right to avoid collision	Runway lights prevent lateral exit or safe passage, collision hazard high.
		Provision for crosswind/ thermal/ gust encounters	common during best soaring conditions, safe release and abort possible	If likely, no fly, due to runway light collision potential.
		Uninterrupted glider launch sequencing	yes	Must clear main runway for any glider or powerplane landing
		Independent Operations	No: dependent on mainrunway ops	No: dependent on mainrunway ops, however could saturate main runway for both types.
		Heavy tow/glider configuration departures	yes	Runway lights present hazard to gliders due to likelihod of dropped wing
Glider Landings		Non interference with other powered operations	landing powered traffic must yield right of way to landing gliders	landing glider owns the runway until it has cleared hold short line, gliders stopped short require vehicle towing to clear
		Crosswind/gust/thermal/ Landings	up to pilot/sailplane limits	Runway lights likely to cause damage and pilot injury due to weathervaning glider.
		Glider runway availability	Only compatible glider traffic landing on glider strips	patial: runway closed till glider traffic including stopped gliders and or marshalled towplane-glider cleared
Summary			Good Capability	Unacceptable

Glider Operations have dropped off 40% since directed to main runway August 6, 2013 due to Safety and Operational Restrictions, ops analysis by J. Shmoldas

The mission of CalTrans calls for the “safest transportation in the nation for users and workers...and to maximize transportation system performance and accessibility... and to preserve and enhance California’s resources and assets...” To achieve this, CalTrans is authorized to *inspect* airports for compliance to federal airport design standards. Their permitting process is simply a way for local operators to acquire a layer of legal protection from liability. CalTrans cannot close an airport or a runway, they can only state that one is in deviation from standards, and perhaps decline to issue a permit. In fact the criteria by which CalTrans can close a runway or airport, by withdrawal of permits, none of which are mentioned in the May 14, 2013 CalTrans letter, are shown below.

1. **There has been an abandonment of a site or an airport.**
2. **There has been a failure within the time prescribed to develop the site as an airport or to comply with the conditions of the approval as set forth in the permit.**
3. **The airport or site no longer conforms to the minimum airport standards prescribed by the Department, or no longer complies with the conditions imposed in the Airport Permit or site approval.**
4. **The owner or operator of a permitted airport has failed to comply with any rule or regulation of the Department.**
5. **The site may no longer be safely used by the general public because of a change in physical or legal conditions either on or off the airport site.**

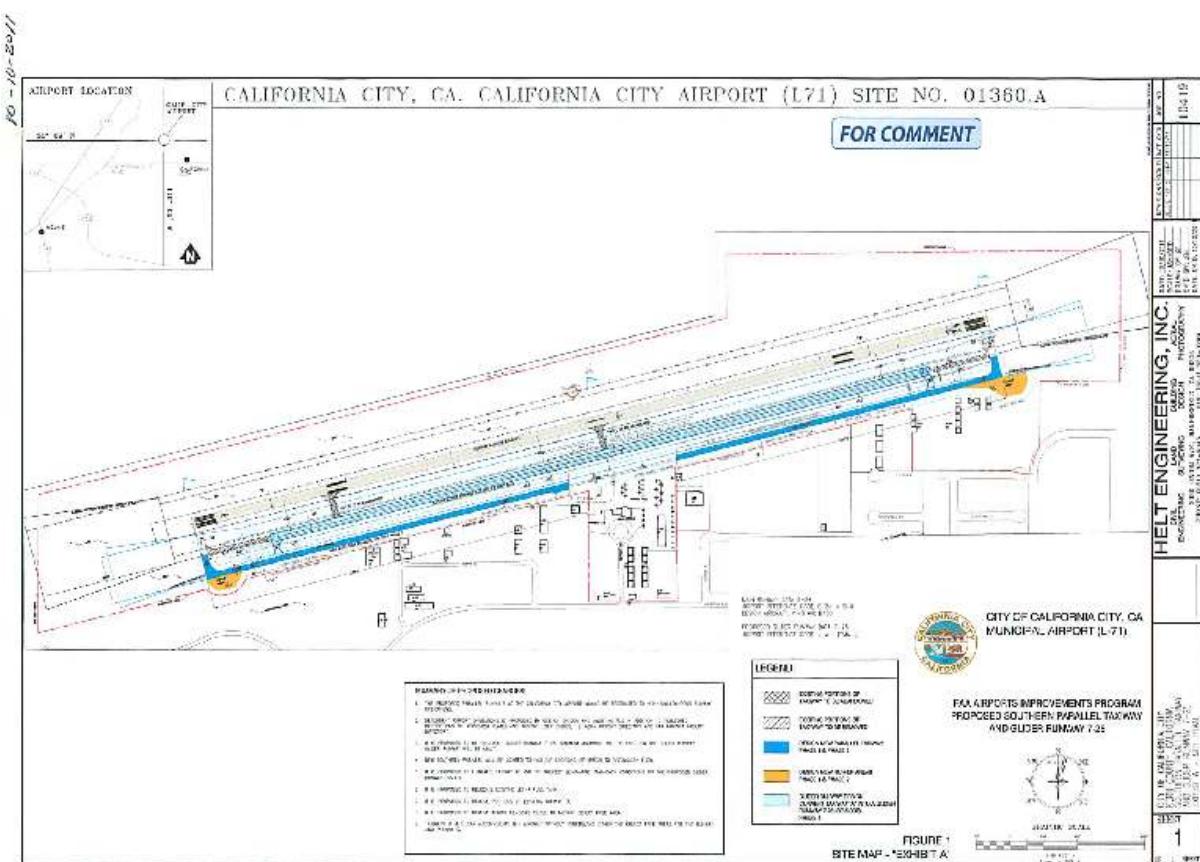
Ref: PUC 21668, June 2013

After the directed closure of the glider runways, the City moves breathtakingly quickly at Weil's direction and constructs a "temporary" taxiway across glider runway 06 on 23 Aug 13. Surprised at the construction preparations, ME Aviation requests that "no bump" or permanent damage be made to the glider runways as they will be likely restored.



New taxiway across closed Glider RW 06, Aug 2013
Photos courtesy of Norm Aviation

ME Aviation requested that Norm Hill move the G-2's to newly acquired Norm Hill property south of the airport fence line to which Norm Hill agrees. Norm Hill closed on the purchase of the property about 15 Sep and will need to prepare the site to park the decommissioned Gulfstream 2's. Despite claims from Tom Weil that Norm Hill Aviation is the new "anchor" business at Cal City with 14 Gulfstream 2's, Kern County records confirm that due to decommissioning, none are on the tax rolls. They are salvage hulks having no place on an operational airport interfering with permitted traffic. CalTrans mysteriously reversed the permitted operations and closed the glider runways, likely because they interfered with Tom Weil's objective airport with a new 80,000 psi South Parallel Taxiway and a dedicated 60,000 psi 5000' glider runway replacing the existing taxiway as per below.



Cal City Proposed 5000' Glider Runway and Southern Parallel Taxiway AIP's (shown in blue)

The FAA also dismissed both above projects in September, 2013 as not qualified for AIP funding and also stated firmly that the “FAA doesn’t build glider runways.”

The FAA at the September 16, 2013 meeting, did however favorable consider recessing the main runway lights to eliminate a major sailplane hazard as well as a midfield apron for marshalling sailplanes. The later will require a drainage study and the culvert extensions under the new apron. These projects will be expensive as will the asphalt overlay, the later not likely a candidate for AIP funding. The glider runways if restored could then provide a safe glider operation with minimal interference with power traffic.



Closed Glider Runway 06 with Gulfstreams 2's, Aug 2013, photo by author

In spite of the numerous Cal Trans inspections, reports, and permit changes including the 2002 permits, some apparently at the urging of Cal City management, ***none were ever discussed or provided to the glider FBO*** and glider operations continued safely under the last disclosed permit of April 9, 1993 until now. The glider infrastructure developed over 40 years at California City, if destroyed, will likely never be replaced.

Recommendation: The City Council should support the construction of a glider apron at midfield on main Runway 24/06, flush mounting of runway lights and permanent restoration of the glider runways. The City Manager has requested Cal Trans on October 16, 2013 approval to restore the glider runways, and request a permit for tow operations from the taxiway until new safe and efficient glider infrastructure is in place.

And so California City ***is at a crossroads***, the strategy of “Build It and They Will Come” has only *not* worked, it is driving out hardworking professionals and businesses away, it is sending Southern California soaring enthusiasts to other “glider friendly” airports where they don’t have to fight for their rights, enjoyment or safety. CC Airport belongs to the City of California City and the City, with their own funding and airport generated revenue, can do with it what they wish. But if they want to attract CalTrans and Federal FAA Trust funds, they need to do something practical with cost benefit to the city, the users and all the aviation customer base of the airport, currently most of which are glider owners and operators.

This article was researched by a California City Airport users group comprised of highly experienced glider and power pilots utilizing Cal City Airport and is based on interviews and records received under freedom of information act and other sources. The article was complied by John Shmoldas, COL USAF (retired), whom has worked as both a tow pilot, commercial and recreational glider pilot at Cal City for nearly 20 years.