

Plans rise to save first air terminal

By Marla Matzer Rose *The Columbus Dispatch*



The original Port Columbus airport terminal is on East 5th Avenue on the grounds of John Glenn Columbus International Airport. [FRED SQUILLANTE/DISPATCH]

Historic preservation is always tricky. It's typically more costly and challenging than building new.

When it's an old airport terminal, it's even more so.

The original Port Columbus terminal building on the 5th Avenue side of John Glenn Columbus International Airport was rescued from demolition several years ago, but several proposals to turn it into office space have failed to materialize.

The site has ties to some of the most famous aviators of all time. In addition to serving as Columbus' commercial airport terminal until the 1950s, the distinctive brick building was the easternmost air link of an innovative New York to Los Angeles route on Transcontinental Air Transport. Passengers boarded a train in New York, traveled overnight to Columbus, then boarded a Ford Tri-Motor plane bound for Waynoka, Oklahoma, where they resumed traveling by train to Los Angeles. "Coast to Coast in 48 Hours," boasted Transcontinental in its marketing materials.

Charles Lindbergh and Amelia Earhart were associated with Transcontinental, and both visited Port Columbus around its grand opening.

With its 90th anniversary approaching in 2019, efforts to renovate and repurpose the building are heating up. Estimates of the cost to renovate the building and bring it up to code range from \$2 million to \$3 million. The building is small — the main level is 9,000 square feet, with 3,000 square feet in the basement — and is not currently up to code. Because it is on airport grounds and subject to Federal Aviation Administration rules, any occupant would need to negotiate a ground lease with the Columbus Regional Airport Authority rather than buy the property.

This week may represent a big step forward. Ohio Speaker of the House Cliff Rosenberger plans to include funding in the proposed state capital budget for an Ohio Aviation Hall of Fame that could be created and housed at the historic terminal building.

“The speaker has an interest in aviation history and the airport,” said Rosenberger spokesman Brad Miller. He noted that Rosenberger, an Air Force veteran, was instrumental in getting Columbus’ airport renamed for the late Sen. John Glenn two years ago. Miller said there is no agreement yet or set funding amount, but he stressed that Rosenberger would like to “preserve the terminal and Ohio aviation legacy.”

George O’Donnel, who has helped spearhead efforts to raise money to save the terminal, hopes this could be the spark that helps make the project work financially. Two years ago, Heartland Bank had to walk away from its plans to renovate the terminal and nearby historic Hangar 1 into its new headquarters.

The Heartland project failed to obtain state historic tax credits it needed to make it work. Heartland CEO Scott McComb said the main factor was that the project scored too low on impact to the local neighborhood. Given that the airport has virtually no close-by neighbors, it couldn’t demonstrate that development would aid residents of the immediate area.

Preservationists now are seeking to place the terminal on the National Register of Historic Places, which would open up other avenues for historic-rehab financing.

Despite its history — John Glenn recalled “many teary departures and reunions” at the old terminal during his time as a military aviator during World War II — the building was allowed to deteriorate and faced demolition less than five years ago. The roof leaked; mushrooms and moss grew on the terminal’s floor.

Ron Kaplan, a Columbus native and lifelong aviation buff who resigned last year from the National Aviation Hall of Fame in Dayton after 19 years, has discussed an Ohio aviation hall of fame for two decades. He could see it sharing space at the terminal with other uses, such as offices, a coffee shop or space for special events.

“Very few states do not have a state aviation hall of fame. I’ve long been mystified by why Ohio doesn’t,” Kaplan said, citing the state’s history of producing legendary aviators such as John Glenn, Eddie Rickenbacker, Neil Armstrong, Jim Lovell and Orville and Wilbur Wright.

He also would like to see lesser known but influential aviators recognized: Jerrie Mock, the Bexley housewife who in 1964 became the first woman to fly solo around the world; Norm Crabtree, who as Jim Rhodes’ transportation chief was instrumental in seeing that virtually every Ohio county had an airport; and the black aviators known as the Tuskegee Airmen, who had a base at what is now Rickenbacker Airport during World War II.

Preservationists dream of a historic renovation as lavish as the one the Walt Disney Company recently completed at Grand Central Air Terminal in Glendale, California, which was the end of the Transcontinental line when it opened in 1929. Disney, which is based nearby, did a painstaking restoration of that structure, which now houses offices and space for meetings and events. mrose@dispatch.com @MarlaMRose