Sky’s the limit for Naples Municipal Airport as it thrives in a recovering economy and awaits the imminent return of regularly scheduled commercial flights.

Meanwhile Airport Authority Executive Director Ted Soliday is retiring in April after 22 years at the helm, leaving behind a profitable publicly operated enterprise with money in the bank.

The airport lost its last commercial carrier in 2008 as a bad economy and soaring fuel prices took their toll.

Still it’s prospered from a steady flow of charters and private planes, and remains solidly in the black.

Now Elite Airways plans two flights a week to Newark, New Jersey, early this year.

Here’s a look at the airport’s past, present and future, told through the eyes of four people intimately involved in its continuing evolution.
Ted Soliday
Naples Municipal Airport Executive Director Ted Soliday often gets up early on Saturday and heads for the tarmac to personally direct the flow of planes taxiing on and off the busy airfield’s runways.

“If we get swamped on Saturday when we’re not expecting it, I’m right out there on the ramp,” he said, gesturing toward the bright yellow safety vest on a coat rack in the corner of his unassuming office.

But now Soliday, 69, is leaving that fast-paced life—on April 15 he’ll retire to a house on the Shenandoah River in bucolic New Market, Virginia.

He shepherded the airport through a crushing recession, the loss of all its regularly scheduled passenger flights and a five-year court fight with the Federal Aviation Administration over the Airport Authority’s efforts to ban noisy planes.

But Soliday beat the FAA, regular flights to Newark, New Jersey, are expected to start in February, and the airport now is not only debt-free and financially stable, it also contributes $283.5 million annually to the local economy.

He’s quick to credit his staff for the airport’s successes.

“We are getting recognition for all the good things our staff does. This isn’t Ted Soliday. This is them.”

He’s proudest of the 2005 court victory over the FAA in a dispute over whether the airport had the legal right to ban Stage 1 and Stage 2 jets under 75,000 pounds—manufactured before quieter engines were mandated by the FAA.

“Everybody, and I mean everybody in the country, said we weren’t going to win, that we had no chance,” he said. “We beat them.”
The victory was crucial because the airport—in the countryside when it opened as an Army Air Corps training base in 1943—now must operate shoulder to shoulder with the upscale communities of modern-day Naples that have grown around the airport during the last 70 years, Soliday said.

Without local control over jet noise, he said, finding a balance between noise and homeowners’ peace and quiet would have gone from difficult to nearly impossible.

In 2013, the FAA banned the noisy jets from operating in U.S. airports as of Jan. 1, 2016.

That decision likely was made easier because many of the older jets left the country after the Naples ban, Soliday said.

If Soliday’s biggest triumph was the jet ban, his greatest regret is the way he handled the airport’s commercial airlines when he first arrived in Naples.

“When I got here we had four or five air carriers working from the terminal,” he said, “And we were able to bring a couple
The airfield at Naples Municipal Airport opened in 1943 as a military facility. In 1969, the Florida legislature created the Naples Airport Authority to operate the airport, which sits on a square-mile site.

But that seeming victory soon turned sour, Soliday said.

“There weren’t enough passengers to sustain the new carriers, he said, “so they just departed and the old ones in the meantime had cut down their flights versus increasing their flights, even in the late ’90s when activity was growing like crazy.”

As his tenure winds down, Soliday said, he’s optimistic about the airport’s future—particularly continuing efforts under an ambitious sustainability, conservation and social responsibility plan.

“We’ve saved an awful lot of money in energy,” he said.

One project to create ultra-efficient ponds for filtering out contaminants from runoff water “will set the standards for building ponds in the state of Florida,” he predicted. The project was recognized as Project of the Year by the Florida Airports Council.

Soliday said he’d still like to facilitate more private support for two causes close to his heart: the Museum of Military Memorabilia now operating in space donated by the airport, and the Civil Air Patrol.

He’d like to see a donor step forward to fund a larger, freestanding museum, and he’s tireless in his efforts to support the patrol, which performs missions such as searching for lost boats and promoting youth education.

Soliday said he’ll keep up his involvement with the patrol when he moves to Virginia and likely will continue his love affair with aviation for the rest of his life. “My wife would tell you, if my ship came in, I’d be at the airport.”

**BRUCE BYERLY**

“I love to fly and it’s in my blood,” said Bruce Byerly, vice president of Naples Jet Center, which provides sales and service at the airport.

He also lends his expertise as a member of the all-volunteer Noise Compatibility Committee.
ility Committee, which works to resolve complaints raised by the airport’s neighbors.

“As a pilot, I’d say there’s not much not to like,” he said. Even before moving here, “I always looked forward to going to Naples. It’s well run; it’s well managed. I just can’t think of what it lacks.”

When regularly scheduled commercial flights return, things will only get better, Byerly said.

“I think it makes Naples more accessible—not everyone flies, rents or charters an airplane,” he said. “It restores something that was lost in the great recession.”

**BOB MCDONALD**

Bob McDonald of Punta Gorda runs the nonprofit Museum of Military Memorabilia in the Naples Municipal Airport Commercial Airline Terminal—lovingly assembling the exhibits that give a human face to centuries of sacrifice by the country’s armed forces.

**More than 25,000 people visit the Museum of Military Memorabilia each year.**

“I was the curator for the Military Heritage Museum in Fishermen’s Village, but I always wanted something of my own,” said McDonald, 74, who donated 4,500 of his own 7,000-item collection to the museum.

He approached Airport Executive Director Ted Soliday four years ago and pitched the idea of a museum.

Soliday readily agreed, and in June 2011 the Airport Authority board voted to give the museum 900 square feet near the main

**HELPING LOCAL VETERANS AND A SALUTE TO LOCAL VETERAN TED SOLIDAY**

The Museum of Military Memorabilia, supported by the Naples Senior Squadron, Civil Air Patrol, will honor Ted Soliday at its Second Annual Banquet & Auction, Saturday, Feb. 6. The evening will include a mess hall banquet and USO-flavored entertainment as well as a fundraising auction to support wounded veterans.


Bob McDonald donated his own collection of military artifacts to the Museum of Military Memorabilia. He has served as the museum’s president since 2008.
entrance inside the terminal.

McDonald opened the museum two months later and is now in the process of moving several displays into additional space nearby in the terminal—a request by the Transportation Security Administration because of the guns and other weapons on display.

More than 25,000 people visit the museum each year, and the new space provides plenty of room for expansion, McDonald said. “We have two storage units that are packed.”

**Q:** Why is Newark, New Jersey, a particularly good place for flights to originate from when passenger service returns?

**A:** “In the winter months that whole New York area is our largest business target for business and leisure. We will now have direct access right to the heart of Collier County.”

**Q:** How does Marco Island benefit from the Naples airport?

**A:** “Marco’s distance from Southwest Florida International makes that a bit of a hardship, especially in the corporate meeting market.”

**JACK WERT Q&A**

Jack Wert, above, is executive director of the Naples, Marco Island, Everglades Convention and Visitors Bureau.

*In the winter months that whole New York area is our largest business target for business and leisure. We will now have direct access right to the heart of Collier County.*