

**Transmit a Report  
to the Judge**

May 20, 2025

TO: Christopher Honigsberg, Presiding Judge, Sonoma County Superior Court

FROM: Karen Rocco County Grand Jury

RE: Grand Jury Report – Airports

Enclosed for your review is a copy of the subject report, which has been approved by a supermajority of the grand jury.

After you have completed your review, please initial the appropriate box below and return the report and this cover sheet with your approval and/or comments. If you have any questions, please contact me at [phone number].

Thank you.

Enclosure: Sonoma County Airport

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I approve the report for release

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Please see comments attached

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# **Sonoma County Airport**

## *Addressing Challenges and Preparing for the Future*

### **SUMMARY**

Over the past two decades, Charles M. Schultz-Sonoma County Airport has evolved from a small general aviation facility<sup>1</sup> into a thriving mid-sized commercial airport, now serving more than 700,000 passengers annually. Its growth places it on par with regional airports such as those in Green Bay, WI, and Peoria, IL. However, during this rapid expansion, the airport's management structure, planning efforts, and infrastructure have struggled to keep pace—creating challenges that hinder it from reaching its full economic potential.

Key issues limiting operational efficiency include FAA compliance shortcomings, insufficient management resources, inadequate TSA space for screening during peak travel times, and limited parking capacity. These factors strain the airport's ability to grow sustainably. Missed opportunities in parking revenue and commercial leasing continue to limit the airport's ability to generate maximum benefit for both it and the county.

This report highlights these critical concerns and proposes ways to enhance regulatory compliance, improve airport operations, and modernize management practices. The objective is to position Sonoma County Airport for sustainable growth while maximizing its economic contributions to the region.

The Sonoma County 2024-25 Civil Grand Jury extends its gratitude to the many county officials, private stakeholders, and community members who provided valuable insights throughout this review. We are also encouraged by the county's initiative to launch a citizen-led oversight effort, fostering collaboration and innovative thinking to shape the future of the airport and surrounding property.

Sonoma County Airport can continue to grow as a vital economic engine for the region while providing an exceptional experience for passengers and businesses by proactively addressing these challenges.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The Civil Grand Jury (Grand Jury) pursued multiple avenues of inquiry to ensure accuracy and depth. The investigation included extensive internet searches to gather publicly available information, a thorough review of documents published by local news organizations, and an analysis of records from public meetings of airport commission and local government officials. Additionally, the Grand Jury conducted interviews with key personnel knowledgeable about the airport operations and management practices.

### **BACKGROUND**

Charles M. Schultz-Sonoma County Airport (Airport code STS) is a county-owned, public-use airport. Sonoma County Airport has a rich history that dates to the late 1930s. Sonoma County purchased 339 acres of agricultural land and began constructing a runway in 1939. During World War II, in 1942, the U.S. Army took control of the site, expanded it by adding 826 acres, and developed additional

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<sup>1</sup> General aviation (GA) - Refers to all civil aviation operations other than scheduled commercial airline flights and military aviation. It's a broad category that includes everything from small private planes and helicopters to business jets and even gliders and balloons

infrastructure, extending the original runway, building a second runway, taxiways, apron areas, and other facilities. The airport was officially opened for military operations in June 1942 as Santa Rosa Army Airfield. After the war, on July 8, 1946, Sonoma County resumed operation of the airport as a civil facility. Therefore, while initial construction began in 1939, the airport commenced operations in 1942 under military control and transitioned to civilian use in 1946.

STS, like all public airports in the United States, is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). Air traffic control, safety and runway facilities requirements, noise and other environmental impact and security administration must all meet FAA minimum standards. One particular aspect of FAA requirements pertains to Airport Master Plans: Advisory Circular (AC) 150/5070-6B outlines the recommended practices and requirements for developing airport master plans, which serve as long-term planning tools to guide the sustainable development of airport facilities. The FAA emphasizes that the master planning process should be tailored to the specific needs of each airport, whether it's a small general aviation facility or a large commercial service airport. This comprehensive document lists the many things that an airport is required to consider when establishing and executing its operational plans and budgets, including:

1. **Inventory of Existing Conditions:** A comprehensive assessment of current airport facilities, infrastructure, airspace, and environmental considerations.
2. **Aviation Activity Forecasts:** Projections of future aviation demand, including passenger enplanements, aircraft operations, and cargo volumes.
3. **Facility Requirements:** Identification of the necessary facilities and infrastructure to meet projected demand, ensuring compliance with safety and design standards.
4. **Alternatives Analysis:** Evaluation of various development options to meet facility requirements, considering factors such as cost, environmental impact, and operational efficiency.
5. **Airport Layout Plan (ALP):** A detailed, scaled drawing depicting existing and proposed airport facilities, which must be approved by the FAA for federally obligated airports.
6. **Implementation Plan:** A phased approach to development, including cost estimates, funding sources, and project timelines.
7. **Environmental Considerations:** Assessment of potential environmental impacts associated with proposed developments, in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other relevant regulations.
8. **Public Involvement:** Engagement with stakeholders, including the community, airport users, and governmental agencies, to gather input and foster transparency throughout the planning process.

While initially serving general aviation, private, and charter flights, the airport currently hosts commercial carriers such as Alaska Airlines, Avelo, and American Airlines.

The airport's rapid expansion, particularly in the years following the post-COVID economic recovery, has made it into one of Sonoma County's greatest success stories. It is the nearest airport to Sonoma county's renowned wine-growing region and the greater North Bay area, with a service area encompassing more than 800,000 residents. The closest other major airports—Sacramento, Oakland, and San Francisco International—are significantly farther, making Sonoma County Airport a crucial gateway for both business and leisure travelers. Sonoma County Airport directly and indirectly supports approximately 1,700 jobs and has a significant multiplier effect on the local economy.

Recognizing the airport's increasing importance, the Grand Jury initiated an investigation to assess how effectively the airport is planning, adapting, and responding to its rapid growth. This inquiry was not driven by complaints or concerns of misconduct but rather by a commitment to ensuring that the airport continues to serve the county efficiently and sustainably. Given STS' position as a major economic engine and essential public asset, it is critical to evaluate its development strategy, operational readiness, and long-term vision.

## DISCUSSION

### Airport Management and Operations

Sonoma County Airport is owned and operated by Sonoma County. The airport's 22 staff members are county employees; the Airport Manager reports to the Director of the Sonoma County Public Infrastructure Department, who reports to the Sonoma County Executive, who reports directly to the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors. In fiscal year 2025, the Board approved the addition of two Airport Operations Specialist positions to enhance operational efficiency and safety. STS's annual operating budget is \$25.4 Million.

#### *Terminal Modernization and Expansion:*

In November 2022, the airport unveiled a modernized terminal following a comprehensive \$40 million renovation project. The expansion added over 27,000 square feet, bringing the terminal's total size to approximately 56,000 square feet. Key enhancements included a renovated ticketing lobby, improved security lanes, additional boarding gates, expanded concessions, a new baggage claim area with dual carousels, and outdoor seating options. The project aimed to elevate the passenger experience and accommodate growing air travel demand.

#### *Passenger Volume Trends:*

Passenger traffic at STS has demonstrated a consistent upward trajectory in recent years:

- **2015:** 263,142 passengers
- **2019:** 488,179 passengers
- **2020:** 195,303 passengers (a decline attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic)
- **2021:** 435,427 passengers
- **2022:** 614,481 passengers
- **2023:** 641,178 passengers
- **2024:** 772,758 passengers

In 2024, Sonoma County Airport experienced record-breaking passenger traffic, with a total of 772,758 travelers, marking a 20.5% increase from the 641,178 passengers in 2023.

When evaluating STS's performance relative to similar regional airports of similar size and usage, several factors are noteworthy:

- **Passenger Growth:** STS has experienced a robust recovery and growth trajectory post-pandemic, with 2023 passenger numbers surpassing pre-pandemic levels and 2024 volume establishing a new traffic record.

- **Terminal Enhancements:** The \$40 million terminal modernization completed in 2024 was intended to position STS competitively, offering amenities and capacities comparable to other medium sized airports, thereby enhancing its appeal to both leisure and business travelers.
- **Airline Partnerships:** The presence of carriers such as Alaska, American, and Avelo Airlines, offering direct services to 8 U.S. destinations, underscores STS's strategic importance and connectivity. Airport management continues to try to attract additional carriers and flights.

These developments align STS with national trends observed in regional airports that have invested in infrastructure and service enhancements to meet evolving passenger expectations and stimulate further growth.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

Sonoma County Airport has faced several operational and infrastructure challenges in the past year. These issues, while documented extensively in local media, highlight the growing pains associated with increased activity at the airport, as well as the complexities of maintaining aging infrastructure and complying with FAA regulations. The following are among the most pressing issues currently affecting STS:

#### *Runway Structural Integrity and Maintenance Deficiencies*

In mid-2024, Sonoma County Airport experienced significant runway issues, including the discovery of multiple sinkholes. In May 2024, a hole measuring between 12 and 18 inches in depth was identified on the main runway, leading to a temporary closure for emergency repairs. Subsequent inspections revealed additional pavement failures, which were linked to the deteriorating condition of a culvert beneath the runway. These structural deficiencies necessitated emergency repairs, and the airport has embarked on plans for further maintenance to ensure the continued safety and operational integrity of its main runway. The FAA recently notified the airport that the pace of runway repairs is unacceptable. This situation underscores the challenge of maintaining aging infrastructure at an airport that has seen increased traffic in recent years.

#### *Noise Abatement Issues*

Sonoma County Airport noise complaints from residents increased by more than 200% in 2024. Complaints are largely attributed to the growing presence of larger, louder jet aircraft and new FAA-mandated traffic patterns. As the airport experiences heightened passenger traffic, community members have voiced concerns over the disruption to their quality of life. These complaints have become a point of tension with residents pushing for changes, including potential adjustments to flight paths or operational hours, to mitigate noise levels.

#### *Emergency Planning*

The FAA requires every airport providing commercial passenger service to have a complete and comprehensive Emergency plan. The FAA has notified STS that the current Emergency Plan does not meet FAA standards, and that Sonoma County Airport is required to develop a compliant emergency plan. It has also found repeated violations of regulations for emergency services response time requirements, failure to update pilot communications regarding airfield communications, and a variety of other violations that collectively suggest inadequate airport management resources and non-compliance with mandated safety and operational regulations.



*Master Plan and Strategic Planning*

The airport's current Master Plan was completed in 2007, with an update in 2011. The plan has not been regularly revised to meet the growing demands and challenges of an airport whose traffic has increased by more than 50% in the past six years and tripled in the past decade. The master plan, rather than being a proactive guide for future development, largely serves as a reactive update to the 2007 plan. The Sonoma County Airport Master Plan Update primarily revises projections rather than offering a comprehensive, forward-thinking framework as recommended by FAA Master Plan guidelines.

The need for, and absence of, a fully updated long-term strategic plan is a significant concern and may partially explain why the airport has an ongoing history of operational and infrastructure issues. Following FAA planning guidelines would have included:

- comprehensive assessment of facilities infrastructure (which should have noticed failing runways)
- implementation planning (such as proactive design to reduce TSA screening delays); and
- public involvement regarding environmental concerns (which should have exposed the problems with revised traffic routes producing added air traffic noise)

The Grand Jury recommends that the airport prioritize the development of a comprehensive, updated master plan that considers both immediate needs and long-term projections for the airport's growth. A forward-looking plan will better position the airport to manage future demands and ensure compliance with evolving FAA regulations.

*FAA Compliance requires more Resources and more proactive STS Airport Management*

While the airport is generally in compliance with FAA regulations, inadequate management resources have led to a lack of continuity and a reactive approach to issues rather than a proactive, anticipatory stance. The airport's inability to handle aircraft noise complaints is one notable example of this issue.

The FAA sets takeoff and landing protocols for commercial airlines without input from the local airport or the surrounding community. Airport management was unaware of new FAA flight protocols until noise complaints began to surface. While the FAA is not required to consult with the airport in advance of such changes, more proactive airport management would have communicated the changes to the public before complaints arose and taken early steps to address community concerns. Airport management is now taking a reactive approach by engaging with the FAA to advocate for adjustments in future flight traffic patterns.

Another example of an FAA compliance issue: the airport's property portfolio includes two county-owned properties that are not related to airport operations and are not generating rental income. These properties—one an equipment yard for the Sonoma County Public Infrastructure Department and the other the North County Detention Facility operated by the Sonoma County Sheriff—do not comply with FAA regulations, which require all airport usage to contribute to the airport's revenue. While negotiations are ongoing to transfer some of this land back to the airport for public parking and to secure rental payments for the remaining property, these discussions have progressed slowly and remain unresolved at the time of this report.

More robust management structure is needed to improve the airport's responsiveness to emerging issues. Proactive engagement with community concerns and FAA partners, especially regarding noise mitigation and operational changes, will help build stronger stakeholder relationships.

*Organization structure concerns*

Sonoma County Airport is a department within the Public Infrastructure Division of County government, a common organizational placement for small airports in rural counties. STS's growth, however, has turned it into a regional airport with most of the requirements and challenges of a very public-facing agency: it needs long term investment plans, marketing and communication capability, management succession plans, and staff capable of addressing a host of operational management challenges that are atypical for a local government agency.

The current organization structure has one manager, an assistant manager, four administrative assistants/aides, one IT specialist, a real estate project specialist, a marketing specialist, and an administrative services (budgeting & contracts) officer. Its 2025 budget is approximately 9% of the Public Infrastructure Division total budget, and it gets minimal Infrastructure Division senior leadership attention unless there are significant problems or opportunities.

The Civil Grand Jury notes that the Airport division of Sonoma County Public Infrastructure has essentially the same staffing today that it had in 2019 - while serving almost 300,000 more passengers and twice as many commercial flights. The only staffing additions during this 5-year period are an IT specialist and (2) operations staffers. Management resources and qualifications are unchanged, in an undeniably more challenging environment. In effect, county leadership is treating the airport as if the significant traffic growth and larger facilities under management don't require more resources, or more capable staffing, than were needed to handle a *much* smaller business six years ago.

Sonoma County Airport significantly impacts multiple aspects of Sonoma county business development, interacts with (and answers to) both Federal and State of California authorities, and needs senior leadership that is able and empowered to navigate these challenges. The Civil Grand Jury notes that the Airport Division's current organizational placement as an entity within a much larger Sonoma County department with other priorities may not result in the resources and leadership attention required for long-term success.

*Facility Constraints and Parking Issues*

The recently completed terminal expansion, while providing some relief, has left the airport with limited room for further expansion. The TSA checkpoint at Sonoma County Airport continues to be a bottleneck during periods of heavy traffic, with little room for dedicated "Pre-check" lines to expedite passengers with pre-cleared security profiles. The recently completed expansion has left the airport with limited room for further expansion to accommodate the projected growth in passenger traffic.

As passenger traffic has increased, Sonoma County Airport has been unable to meet the rising demand for parking. A notable instance of this occurred in October 2024 when the airport saw a surge of approximately 200 more vehicles than available parking spaces could accommodate. This increase coincided with the introduction of Avelo Airlines' service to Ontario, California. The airport's parking facilities are being stretched to their limits as passenger numbers continue to grow, raising concerns about the need for further investment in parking to meet demand.

Parking and passenger pick-up space limitations also led airport management to adopt a counter-intuitive policy that precludes scheduled passenger pick-up by Uber and Lyft, the (2) major ride-share providers. Passenger inability to pre-arrange pickup, especially for early morning and late evening arrivals, means fewer passengers will choose to use third party transportation and thereby decrease parking demand.

Avelo Airlines closed its base at Sonoma County Airport on May 1, 2025, due to low demand and underperformance. While some routes will be discontinued, others like Burbank and Las Vegas will remain. The closure is expected to have only a minor financial impact on the airport—less than \$200,000 in lost revenue. Passenger traffic and parking demand will likely decrease slightly, potentially easing parking demand. Airport officials believe operations will remain stable despite the changes and are hoping to attract additional airlines and route service to enable continued traffic growth.

## CONCLUSIONS

Sonoma County Airport is a critical economic and transportation asset for Sonoma County. It has grown rapidly from a sleepy general aviation airport to serve more than 700,000 passengers a year. However, its current management structure and planning approach are not consistent with this growth, and are on a slow track to react. Current staffing and funding resources do not align with STS's rapid growth and evolving role in Sonoma County. STS faces significant challenges in strategic planning, management continuity and capability, and facility capacity.

Sonoma County Airport *must* address structural runway construction deficiencies. Community concerns over air traffic noise, and inadequate parking capacity are hurdles that the airport must navigate as it continues to expand. Addressing these operational and infrastructure challenges will be critical in maintaining the airport's role as a vital gateway to Northern California, while also ensuring it remains a good neighbor to the surrounding community.

The airport must also address all FAA compliance issues and further enhance the physical infrastructure to fully capitalize on its potential as a regional economic driver. During the past 5 years, Sonoma County Airport has demonstrated resilience and growth, and these efforts position the airport favorably among its national peers and contribute significantly to the region's economic vitality and connectivity, but the lack of a comprehensive forward-looking master plan is a significant concern that will likely constrain future development.

Looking ahead, STS aims to continue its growth trajectory by attracting additional airline services and expanding its destination offerings. Ongoing investments in infrastructure and community engagement are central to the airport's strategy to strengthen its role as a key transportation gateway in Northern California. However, airport management must also recognize and proactively plan for increased airline activity and expanded flight schedules if it hopes to sustain growth while maintaining satisfactory customer service.

## FINDINGS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury finds that:

- F1. Charles M. Schultz - Sonoma County Airport's failure to update and execute its Master Plan in compliance with FAA recommendations is a root cause of airport maintenance and development problems.
- F2. STS's current management resources are more appropriate for a general aviation or small commercial airport than for the medium sized passenger airport that Sonoma County Airport has become.
- F3. Sonoma County Airport's management is reactive rather than proactive due to inadequate resources and staffing.



- F4. Sonoma County Airport projects compete with road repair, traffic management, purchasing and other projects for senior Public Infrastructure Department leadership attention.
- F5. Parking is the largest airport revenue source, but the absence of adequate parking on site is a material barrier to continued growth.
- F6. Sonoma County use of airport land for non-airport purposes without paying rent could expose the County to significant FAA penalties.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The Sonoma County Civil Grand Jury recommends that:

- R1. By November 1, 2025, Sonoma County Public Infrastructure will determine how to resolve all FAA non-airport land use issues and submit this plan for Board of Supervisors' review.
- R2. By December 1, 2025, the Sonoma County Executive Officer will evaluate whether Sonoma County Airport should continue to be a department within Public Infrastructure or become a stand-alone agency and will forward an appropriate recommendation to the Board of Supervisors.
- R3. By December 1, 2025, the County Executive Officer will evaluate the need for engaging a qualified Airport Master Plan consultant as suggested in FAA Advisory Circular (AC) 150/5070-6B to facilitate a comprehensive review of the Charles M. Schultz-Sonoma County Airport Master Plan.
- R4. By June 1, 2026, Sonoma County Airport shall complete and publish a full update of the Airport Master Plan using the most current version of FAA Advisory Circular (AC) 150/5070-6B to guide requirements for completing the updated plan.

### Required Responses:

Pursuant to Penal Code §§ 933 and 933.05, the civil grand jury requires responses as follows:

- Sonoma County Infrastructure Department to respond to F1, F1, F3, F4, F5; R1, R4
- Sonoma County Executive Officer to respond to R2 and R3

*The governing bodies indicated above should be aware that their comments and responses must be conducted subject to the notice, agenda and open meeting requirements of the Brown Act.*

*Responses must be submitted to the presiding judge of the Sonoma County Superior Court in accordance with the provisions of the Penal Code sections 933 and 933.05. Responses must include the information required by section 933.05.*

### BIBLIOGRAPHY and References:

- US Department of Transportation - FAA, "Airport Master Report", December 9, 2024.
- Press Democrat, "Sonoma Jet Center sues Sonoma County Airport, raising concerns over fuel tank project as feud breaks out between tenants." June 22, 2024.
- October 17, 2024, Sonoma County Airport Commission meeting notes
- County of Sonoma, "Charles M. Schulz – Sonoma County Airport report to Board of Supervisors shows continued growth in passengers, revenue." October 16, 2024.
- Sonoma County Airport, "Master Plan" 2007
- FAA Reauthorization Act of 2018, Section 163 Grant Assurance #25

*Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.*