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OPERATING INTO A NON-TOWERED AIRPORT?

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Tips and Tools Are Available

In light of the decision by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to close air traffic control towers due to budget sequestration, some business aviation pilots may find themselves in a circumstance that they've trained for time and again, yet may also find unfamiliar: operating to and from busy airports they've flown to hundreds of times before, but now without an operational tower.

It is particularly important that operators be aware that during the closure process (not all towers may close on the same day), both paper and electronic charts, as well as the FAA's Airport/Facility Directory (A/FD) may not have the most current information on airspace, tower operating hours and frequencies. This makes it especially important to check Notices to Airmen (NOTAMS) when planning flights.

When the tower closes at a controlled field, the airspace surrounding that airport may revert to either Class E to the surface, Class G airspace, or a combination of the two – usually with a Class E Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) corridor down to 700 feet above ground level, with Class G underlying to the surface. Specific procedures for each airport are listed in the A/FD.

From a practical perspective, that means pilots operating under an IFR flight plan to a newly non-towered field will need to be prepared for the transition from the positive control environment of instrument flight when approaching their destination.

"These are skills that all business aircraft pilots should be familiar with, but now will have to be applied at locations with newly closed control towers," said Bob Lamond, NBAA director, air traffic services and infrastructure.

To properly plan for this circumstance, pilots should thoroughly familiarize themselves with the airspace they

will be operating in as part of their preflight. Flight crews should also consider having the necessary charts available in the cockpit for reference – including a VFR sectional chart – as well as airport diagrams for taxi instructions. They should also check notices to airmen (NOTAMS) for closures and other information affecting the destination airport and surrounding airspace.

When approaching the airport, crews should also make a point to keep their eyes outside the cockpit in order to see and avoid other traffic and monitor the radio to help ascertain the positions of other aircraft in the vicinity. Pilots should also communicate their position and cooperate with other pilots in the area to establish the safest approach to the field, with the least potential for conflict with other traffic.

It's important to note that most of the Class D towers facing closure did not provide separation services, merely advisories, so pilots were still responsible for maintaining separation from other traffic. However, knowledge of that extra set of eyes having followed their flight in the past may now lead to diminished situational awareness for some pilots.

In addition to these practices, when departing from a non-towered field, pilots should also be prepared for the additional time it may take to receive an IFR clearance from center controllers and the potential for delays in release times. Expect departure clearance time (EDCT) should also be part of preflight planning at newly non-towered airports.

Pilots seeking additional guidance in operating to non-towered airports may contact NBAA's Operations Service Group at (202) 783-9250 or ops@nbaa.org.

OTHER RESOURCES

- » FAA Air Traffic Control System Command Center (ATCSCC) – Operational Information System (OIS) – Real-time information on the current state of the National Airspace System (NAS)
- » FAA ATCSCC – EDCT – Allows aircraft operators to determine if an Expect Departure Clearance Time (EDCT) has been issued for their flight
- » Aeronautical Information Manual (AIM) – Section 3 Airport Operations – Reviews correct airport traffic pattern procedures to reduce the risk of conflict with other aircraft
- » FAA Pilot's Handbook of Aeronautical Knowledge – Chapter 13 Airport Operations – This FAA document provides a wealth of valuable, practical information regarding airport operations of all kinds, including at non-towered fields
- » AOPA Air Safety Institute guide to Operations at Non-towered Airports – Guidance specifically geared to pilots lacking recent experience operating from non-towered airports
- » Midair Collisions: The Myth and the Math (originally published in Aviation Safety Magazine) – This excellent overview includes suggested "see and avoid" techniques to reduce the risk of midair collisions

ABOUT NBAA

Founded in 1947, the National Business Aviation Association (NBAA) is the leading organization for companies that rely on general aviation aircraft to help make their businesses more efficient, productive and successful.