



BY ALLISON GORMAN

# Up, Up or Away

## The push for a new airport ruffles some feathers

**F**ifty years ago the Church of God of Prophecy launched its mission planes, and its successful ministry, from a grass airstrip in Cleveland, Tenn. Then it helped launch the future of its hometown. It transferred to the city a deed for five acres, including the airstrip, which ultimately became the 3,500-foot paved runway at Hardwick Field, Bradley County's municipal airport.

That modest runway would, in turn, launch a classic small-city debate: To what extent is it the responsibility—or the privilege—of an influential few to define the course of a city's progress?

Like most cities of its size, Cleveland has benefited notably from the civic investment of stalwart businesses that took root there. In recent years, local entrepreneurs like Check into Cash founder Allan Jones, have helped update their hometown's image through targeted charitable donations and investment.

With his outsized persona and famously ostentatious lifestyle, Allan Jones is perhaps Cleveland's most celebrated benefactor. But the city also has blossomed through the corporate presence of Life Care Centers of America, begun by Forrest L. Preston as a single convalescent home and now operating 260 elder care facilities in 28 states. Toby McKenzie and Brenda McKenzie Lawson, who, like Jones, made a fortune in the payday loan business, are a philanthropic presence not only in Cleveland but also in Knoxville and Chattanooga, where they are major donors to the University of Tennessee.

The benevolence of such citizen-stewards has in large measure helped Cleveland emerge as a community of choice for educated people who like their Frappuccinos but want to enjoy them in an insular environment. Last year, the combination of its cultural and educational amenities and its small-city stats—a relatively low crime rate and cost of living—landed Cleveland on *Forbes'* list of "Best Small Places for Business and Careers."

But while Cleveland has come into its own as a city, Bradley County's industrial growth has not been commensurate. Once fifth in manufacturing behind Tennessee's "big

four" metropolitan areas, Bradley County now ranks ninth, says Gary Farlow, the Cleveland/Bradley chamber's vice president for economic development.

"As it relates to the rest of the state," he says, "we're still pretty high in terms of manufacturing employment as a percentage of the total. I think at one time we were as high as 33%; now, we're at 25% or 26%. The state average is about 12% or 13%, so our manufacturing is still high based on that, but the trends nationally are downward."

Jockeying to distinguish Bradley from similar counties packaging themselves as "distribution centers" by virtue of interstate access, a core of municipal and business leaders have aggressively worked to secure land and federal funding for a new airport, which, they have long argued, would be a key recruitment tool for industry.

Although 12 Fortune 500 companies have a presence in Bradley County, Hardwick Field's runway isn't long enough to safely accommodate corporate jets. While Cleveland's well-heeled once kept their private planes at Hardwick, most of the 40 or so planes based there now belong to local hobbyists.

Lynn DeVault, chair of the Cleveland Municipal Airport Authority, has complained that local corporations like Jones Management, of which she's president, must base their aircraft 30 miles away in Chattanooga.

Few existing manufacturers in the county have been outspoken proponents of a new airport, however.

"Most of them are the supplier types," says Jerry Bohannon, president of the Cleveland/Bradley Chamber of Commerce. "They've survived so long without an airport, they've kind of made do without."

Still, he says, Hardwick's limitations likely have deterred other industries from locating in Bradley County, although the nature of the site selection process means a city may never know why or whether it was struck from a short list.

"We feel [with an upgraded airport] there would be some manufacturing growth that we do not have now," he says.

So the powers-that-be breathed a collective sigh of relief



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last July, when the airport authority secured a deal on the last of nine contiguous properties north of the city, the proposed site of a new \$25 million airport.

With 362 acres under option, the airport authority is proceeding with a \$176,000 environmental assessment preliminary to groundbreaking. The new airport, including a 5,500-foot runway and a fixed-base operations building, could be functional by 2010, says Lou Patten, the airport authority's vice chair. The timing's crucial, he adds: A larger, more modern airport might serve as a lure for supplier facilities that would follow any big manufacturer reeled in at Chattanooga's Enterprise South Park, the TVA "Megastite" just 20 minutes south on I-75.

It would also serve as a monument to a dogged, 30-year effort on the part of Cleveland's power structure to build the facility despite equally determined grassroots opposition. An earlier attempt to relocate spurred state legislation making it illegal for a city to condemn county land for use as an airport. Later, the airport authority scrapped plans to expand facilities at Hardwick Field by eminent domain, hoping to avoid ill will among the airport's neighbors.

And increasingly, Hardwick's neighbors are a moneyed crowd. While modest homes sit nearby, high-end subdivisions have sprouted there as well. A relocated airport might offer Cleveland local access to corporate aircraft while exporting noise from its wealthiest neighborhoods.

It has also exported ill will. A petition against the project garnered some 500 signatures from the site's neighbors, and one has sued the airport authority and the Bradley County Commission, alleging they ignored protocol and citizens' protests in order to railroad the project through zoning and approval.

Patten acknowledges there was a stutter in the rezoning process when the Bradley County Planning Commission failed to make a recommendation on the proposal before passing it along for approval to the county

commission. "There was a big crowd there, and I think they were kind of intimidated," he says.

The suit further alleges that the authority put some land under option for a purchase price far exceeding its appraised value and apparently failed to have other properties appraised before a price was secured. Among the property owners involved in the sale are Brenda McKenzie Lawson and Jones Properties.

At issue, argued plaintiff's attorney Richard Fisher, is municipal leaders' desire to push the project "at any cost."

Pete Edwards, editor of the online paper *The People News*, acknowledges that a new airport might benefit business to a limited degree but criticizes what he calls the "backroom deals" that led to the project.

"I don't think it will do any harm to have an airport for business, for those that can afford or need to use an aircraft," he says. "But I think this is a private thing—what they're doing now they're doing over the heads of the citizens. The good old boys do tend to advance communities—providing there's some checks and balances."

Lou Patten says the airport authority will proceed with the project "unless the judge tells us we have to stop. We think everything we've done has been legal, above-board and proper."

Edwards theorizes there are plans in the works already to sell Hardwick Field, "because that's the way things are done in this town. Someone's going to get a pretty good deal, and then that whole area there will be big, fancy homes a couple of miles away from a new airport."

Doubtless those five flat acres have appreciated well beyond their original sale price of \$1,040—a figure that might raise eyebrows in Cleveland, where it is widely believed that the property was a gift to the city. In fact, eight years after signing the deed of sale, the Church of God of Prophecy showed entrepreneurial savvy befitting its hometown: It secured first rights of refusal to the land should the city relocate its airport. **tn**

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