

## New directors hope airport will take off

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**By Jenny Hartley - Staff Writer**

The runways at the Lancaster County Airport are quiet and peaceful on a recent Friday afternoon.

In an hour's time, just one plane lands to deliver an aircraft part.

Gary and Sandy Laubscher want something different than peace and quiet at the airport, which boasts one of the longest runways of a non-commercial airport east of the Mississippi at 6,000 feet.

"I can't wait till this place comes back to life," Sandy Laubscher said, watching her husband take off in a small Alarus plane.

The Laubschers, of Rock Hill, are leasing the airport from Lancaster County. They have big plans for the place that include flight instruction, aircraft rental, maintenance and fueling.

"Our goal is to get the people back to the airport," Gary Laubscher said. On Saturdays, the couple plans community get-togethers, complete with food.

This Saturday, barbecue is on the menu, and the public is encouraged to attend. They hope these weekend meals will bring people out to watch the planes and inspire some to take a lesson or a scenic flight.

"Some of the people will never fly, but they'll tell a friend," Gary Laubscher said.

He said he became interested in planes during a seventh-grade aeronautics class. As a gift, he was given a discovery flight, which is an introductory flight lesson and was hooked.

He spent four years in the U.S. Navy, flying P-3 Orion planes, and also spent three years in the Army. He moved to Rock Hill for the company he worked for, Dove Brothers Machinery and Equipment Appraisals, and began flying for the Civil Air Patrol, the U.S. Air Force auxiliary, out of the Rock Hill Airport. The flight school there was closed for almost two years before the Laubschers and another couple decided to give flight instruction a try.

Their plan went against the airport commission there, which wanted the Rock Hill Airport to attract corporate aircraft.

The Laubschers expected a \$30,000 income from the flight school that year. What they got was \$490,000, Gary Laubscher said.

"It took off 110 times better than we thought," he said.

The Laubschers want the same results in Lancaster.

There has already been increased interest in the airport already, with one aircraft company proposing to lease a section of the airport, build a hangar and manufacture aircraft on site, the Laubschers say.

Right now, 32 planes are based at the Lancaster airport, leasing a space for \$70 a month.



Gary and Sandy Laubscher, new directors of the Lancaster County Airport, pose in front of a plane. They plan regular weekend meals to encourage people to visit the airport.

Photo by Chip Oglesby/Staff Photographer

One of Gary Laubscher's favorite aircraft, a light sport aircraft named "The Freebird," waits in one of the hangars to be taken out for an excursion.

"Airplanes are OK; these are fun," Gary Laubscher said, looking at The Freebird with an admiring gaze. Lancaster County Airport Commission Chairman Tom Paquin stopped by, praising the Laubschers. The airport commission and County Council approved hiring the couple to operate the airport.

"I think we've got some good folks," Paquin said. "They've got a lot of good ideas."

One of Gary Laubscher's Civil Air Patrol buddies, Gerald Hensley of Richburg, also stopped by to watch planes and check on his friend.

Hensley said his wife, Patricia, learned to fly at the Lancaster County Airport, and he has high hopes for the airport now.

"This is one of the nicest airports in South Carolina," Hensley said. "You could land a 737 here if you had to."

The Lancaster County Airport is open from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Sundays. For details, call 285-1513.

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