

Ga. governor, GA governor

By Sarah Brown



Sonny Perdue was a long shot in the Georgia governor's race. His opponent, the incumbent governor, had set a state fundraising record, raising eight times as much as Perdue for the 2002 campaign, and was a fixture on television sets throughout the state.

But Perdue decided that if he could get out and meet the people of Georgia, talk to them, and visit their communities in person, he could convince them he would make a better governor. So while his opponent took to the airwaves, Perdue took to the airways.

"People want to be connected to their elected officials," he said. "They want to see them in their community."

Perdue set up his metro Atlanta campaign office at DeKalb-Peachtree Airport. After a morning of phone calls with his staff, he would climb into his Bellanca Super Viking and head out to events throughout the state. Regulars at Georgia's general aviation airports got accustomed to the sight of the gubernatorial hopeful in his four-place, single-engine piston airplane. In November 2002, Georgia voters surprised the pollsters and elected Perdue their governor.

"It was a huge advantage being able to get access to the state," Perdue said. For that campaign, his opponent raised \$25 million. Perdue raised \$3 million. He calls the airplane his \$22 million Bellanca.

Perdue has been flying for 40 years. Since he became governor, he has built up turbine time and added a helicopter rating, but a great deal of his flight time has been in single-engine tailwheel aircraft: He recalls fondly his first lessons near the family farm, fixing up a "jalopy" J-5 Cub with his veterinary school roommate, and using the Bellanca to defy the electoral odds. His love of aviation has helped forge friendships with other pilots, strengthened his ties to communities across the state, and driven his efforts to improve Georgians' access to airports.

Steve Champness arrived at the governor's mansion several years ago with a Trade-A-Plane in hand. He was attending an event for Atlanta's Museum of Patriotism and knew he would meet the governor, so he brought along the publication to break the ice.

"He was really excited—he knew Trade-A-Plane real well," said Champness, the president of the Atlanta Aero Club and a sales executive for Trade-A-Plane. "... I knew he was an aviation guy, and because of his love of aviation and mine, we always had something to talk about. That's the common denominator for pilots anywhere and everywhere."



Perdue's flight time was in single-engine piston aircraft before he became governor. He now flies the left seat of the state King Air, saving the cost of a copilot.

Though he occupies the state's highest office, Perdue projects an air of approachability and connects easily with other pilots.

"One thing that's so great about Gov. Perdue is that he's accessible," Champness said. "He's somebody who really looks out for the aviation community, and that's special." Champness went on to work with Perdue on aviation issues after their initial meeting, including a recent proclamation honoring aviation's contributions to the state and naming October "Aviation Appreciation Month."

"He's really a good guy," Champness said. "Anybody who meets him can feel his warmth and his sincerity."

A life full of GA

The love of aviation began early for Perdue, who started taking flying lessons at with an aerial applicator who treated his family's farm in the late 1960s. He finished his private pilot training while going to veterinary college in Athens, Ga.

Perdue's roommate there bought a beat-up J-5 Cub, and the two young men took it on as a project. "That was our jalopy," Perdue told the Atlanta Aero Club in a speech in July. "On weekends we'd go and patch that J-5 and fix it up."

When he wasn't fixing up the aircraft, he used it to commute the 120 miles to the family farm in Bonaire. He used to fly from the Athens airport to a strip of Georgia Highway 96 where he could taxi off the road right up to the house, he said. He tells the story with a nod to today's stricter FAA enforcements—he's pretty sure the statute of limitations has run out on his offense, he says.

After veterinary school, Perdue moved to Columbus, Ohio, where he was stationed with the Air Force as the base veterinarian. At the GA airport there, he earned additional ratings and his instructor certificate, still flying the J-5. He went about a decade without an airplane after that, and then he bought a Maule M4 in the late 1980s. Finally, he got the Bellanca that carried him across the state for the 2002 campaign.

But aviation is more than a hobby or mode of transportation for Perdue. It's a love that he has passed down to his children—a daughter and son are private pilots. While he doesn't fly the Bellanca often anymore, he finds time to instill that passion in his grandchildren as well, taking them out for a flight whenever he can.

"I love to take my grandchildren flying, introducing them to the joys of flight," he said, "and they enjoy that. ... I think it gives young people confidence."

Getting there

When he became governor, Perdue got checked out in the state's King Airs so that he could fly himself on state business, saving the state the cost of a copilot for his trips. He earned his helicopter rating in July 2008 and used it recently for emergency management during the floods that enveloped sections of Georgia in September. He said flying allows him to travel efficiently and to get a special perspective of the state.

In the hours he has spent aloft over Georgia, Perdue has watched the landscape change. He monitored the effects of drought in 2007 and 2008, and lately he has watched the depleted reservoirs refill.

"The topography of Georgia is beautifully diverse," he said, "from the Appalachian Mountains in the north to the beautiful and pristine Barrier Islands on the east coast. To be able to fly over them in either fixed wing or helicopter, it's pretty inspiring."

As a flying governor, Perdue has worked to make sure the state makes the best use of its aviation resources. Georgia state agencies own about 85 aircraft for forestry, law enforcement, executive travel, wildlife assessment, and other purposes. Many of the aircraft are aging, and until recently each agency had to appropriate money for its aircraft fleet separately; when aviation assets are seen as luxuries or toys, Perdue said, it becomes difficult to reserve money for their upkeep and operation. In May 2009, the governor signed legislation to create the Georgia



Perdue (right) with CFI Ron Carroll and a Robinson R44 in front of the Georgia capitol. Perdue earned his helicopter rating in 2008.

Aviation Authority to govern the state's aircraft management.

The aviation authority was designed to coordinate the use of state aircraft to meet the missions of multiple agencies, standardize maintenance and training to reduce costs and increase safety, and modernize the fleet. Rather than being luxuries, aircraft are business tools: "These are tools like all other tools to help us become efficient," Perdue said.

Access to all

Having experienced the value of GA airports to rural communities, Perdue launched the Airport Initiative in Rural Georgia (AirGeorgia) in 2006. The initiative has a goal of having an all-weather airport with a 5,000-foot runway within a 30-minute drive of all communities.

GA airports are many people's connectivity to the world, Perdue said. As business executives look for a place to establish plants or businesses, they want to be able to get there quickly. A GA airport makes that possible.

"We find that communities thrive when they have a healthy general aviation airport," he said. Under Perdue's leadership, Georgia has helped bridge the gap between FAA grant money and local investments in airport infrastructure.

Perdue has seen the benefits of rural airports and GA aircraft firsthand—after all, the Bellanca helped him secure the job he holds today. And while Georgia term limits prevent Perdue from running for governor again in 2010, that may mean he'll have more time to spend in the \$22 million Bellanca.