

# Race shuts down runway for two weeks

by **MIKE MAHARREY**  
contributing writer

For one weekend every year, the whine of race cars replaces the roar of airplane engines at the Albert Whitted Airport. Each spring, the airport undergoes a transformation into an international race course.

The Honda Grand Prix of St. Petersburg brings upwards of 100,000 racing fans into downtown and provides a significant economic impact to the city. But for those who utilize the airport for its intended purpose, the race presents both opportunities and headaches.

The Albert Whitted Airport Preservation Society found a way to cash in on the race. They provided about 45 volunteers to staff a concession stand selling water, soft drinks and beer. In return for their efforts, AWAPS received a set amount of money for each volunteer and also a percentage of sales above a target amount. Although Terri Griner, president of AWAPS, was not able to give specific dollar amounts, she said the society hoped to raise over \$4,000.

Despite the fundraising opportunity afforded by the race, Griner's enthusiasm for the Grand Prix is tempered by the inconvenience to airport users and a lack of direct benefit to the airport.

The race forces the closing of the main runway for about two weeks. The airport is able to keep its north-south runway open, but it is much shorter and is subject to crosswinds. If crosswinds rise above about 15 miles per hour, it may become unsafe for some planes to use that particular runway, according to Don Morris, a pilot and volunteer for AWAPS.

Aircraft owners must also cope with the traffic and parking issues the race creates.

"There's a real negative impact on those who use the airport," said Morris.

David Oliver flies an airplane he built himself. He agrees that the race is a hassle, but tries to keep things in perspective. "It does interrupt airport operations," he said. "I still think the race is a good idea. It's great for the city."

Any use of airport property is subject to FAA approval. "Part of that approval process is that the use must benefit aviation," Griner said. "The race really doesn't."

But the Grand Prix has invested in infrastructure for the airport. It paid \$700,000 to build a concrete strip parallel to the main runway that is used as pit row during the race, according to airport president Rich Lesniak. The value is spread out over 15 years resulting in roughly \$48,000 per year for the airport. Future plans call for the strip to connect to the main runway and serve as a second taxiway, Lesniak said.

He also believes it is important to look at the big picture. "Since the airport is a city owned facility, the benefits go well beyond just the air-



photo | Casey Feldkamp

▲ The Honda Grand Prix enthralled race fans March 30–April 1. The annual race forces the closing of the main runway of Albert Whitted Airport for about two weeks.

port. The race is a benefit to the entire city," Lesniak said.

Griner believes there are more pressing needs than a parallel taxiway, including a new control tower, and that the airport is not financially benefiting from the race as FAA rules require.

"The fact is, we're getting nothing," she said.

Morris called the balance between the needs of the airport and an event like the Grand Prix "a double edge sword." He recognizes the benefit to the city, but

agrees that the airport itself is not being served.

"How does this further aviation?" Morris asked, gesturing toward the racetrack.

As Griner navigated her golf cart through the growing throng of race fans and she struggled to talk over the scream of race cars and tried to keep things in perspective.

"It really is exciting," she said. "I just wish some of this money was coming directly back to the airport."