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CENTERPIECE

## Aircraft manufacturer owners claim city is forcing them out after 50 years

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Frakes Aviation employees face an uncertain future following the city's decision not to renew the company's building lease after 50 years of operating at Cleburne Municipal Airport.

Courtesy photo



The owners of Frakes Aviation, an aircraft manufacturing company at Cleburne Municipal Airport, said city officials are forcing them to relocate after 50 years at their current location.

Cleburne City Manager Steve Polasek denied such claims.

Either way, Frakes Aviation has until Halloween to find a new home.

For now, Frakes Aviation continues to operate out of the large yellow hangar on the airport's northside, one of two hangars company founders built when they moved the company to Texas in 1973.

“Frakes Aviation, recognized worldwide as a leading manufacturer of turbine engine exhaust systems, and with a storied history in aviation, has been a fixture at Cleburne Municipal Airport for 50 years,” General Manager Joseph Frakes said. “Now, city officials have terminated the lease agreement effective Oct. 31. With nowhere to go, Frakes Aviation faces an uncertain future.”

Frakes father, David Joe Frakes, and grandfather, J. Fred Frakes, started the company in 1967 in California.

Both, during a visit to Cleburne, met then City Manager Lloyd Moss who convinced them to relocate to Texas.

“[Grandfather] liked Cleburne’s friendly business climate and thought it would be a safe, comfortable place to settle with his family,” Joseph Frakes said.

Joseph Frakes described his grandfather as having quite a background having run modification companies out of Denver and a frozen dough company in Seattle before starting Frakes Aviation.

“Mainly though, he flew as a bush pilot in Alaska for 26 years before all that,” Frakes said.

Through the years, Frakes has employed hundreds, Joseph Frakes said, up to 150 at some points though the facility now employs a smaller crew.

“I’ve been a part of the Frakes Aviation family off and on since 1984,” longtime employee Norman Walker said. “The company has survived recessions and pandemics. It’s sad that the city’s decision to not renew the lease could put us out of business.”

Tracy Wilson, another longtime employee, began working for Frakes Aviation in 1975, right out of high school. Wilson’s father also worked for the company.

“This is basically my life,” Wilson said. “I can’t believe they’re doing this to us.”

Wilson often represented the company and in turn the airport, at local events, parades and donation collections. He and others constructed a set of airplane carts pulled by a tractor for children to ride in during events.

“We represented the Cleburne airport, not Frakes Aviation,” Wilson said.

With customers around the world, Frakes manufactures exhaust stacks sold both as original equipment and aftermarket.

The stacks, which have been installed on more than 3,000 aircraft, are cut, machined, welded and polished in Cleburne, a legacy, Joseph Frakes said, both Frakes Aviation and Cleburne can be proud of.

## **Lease history**

“We built our biggest building, the one we’re still in, in stages,” Joseph Frakes said. “The smaller building was built in ‘74 or ‘75. The original agreement was that we lease the land for a sum and that, at the end of the lease, the buildings would become the property of the city of Cleburne. The leases were staggered on the two buildings so that both would expire in 2008.”

From that point, Frakes leased the buildings from the city.

“At some point, I think it was 2018, they told us that they wanted the smaller building,” Joseph Frakes said. “It was on a different lease cycle and technically still in the lease cycle to my understanding, but they wanted us out of it.

“So we moved our stuff there to the bigger building, which really cramped it tight.”

Since 2008 through different mayors and city managers, Joseph Frakes said the company was only able to negotiate temporary leases.

“Until we got a three-year lease that had one-year rollovers after that,” Frakes said.

“We’ve been on one-year rollovers for several years now, which I’ve never been happy about. But [the city] doesn’t want to negotiate anything longer term than that. We’ve asked several times but they’ve never shown any interest in anything longer.”

A city letter to Frakes Aviation informing of the city’s intent not to renew their lease included the city’s intent to help the company find a new location, Frakes said, but added that no such help arrived.

“They offered no such help, however, and refused to even communicate about the difficulties Frakes Aviation now faces,” Frakes said. “It seems unreasonable to kick a company out that is paying rent and has been operating for 50 years from a location, giving no reason than Cleburne doesn’t want us anymore.”

Polasek disagreed, saying that while company officials were officially notified of the city's intent not to renew the lease in April, such news was hardly new.

"They've been notified for the last couple of years that we were going to look to end our lease agreement with them," Polasek said. "We have offered for the last three years for [Cleburne Economic Development Manager Grady Easdon] to work with them to help locate a place for them to relocate and they have not taken advantage of that."

Claims Frakes disputes.

"If either of those things ever happened they never happened with me," Frakes said. "That offer was never made and telling us we were going to be out in a few years was never told to me. In fact, the only thing that they had said was that they were going to raise our rent."

Polasek said two reasons drive the city's decision to not renew the lease.

"They're not using that entire space for aviation purposes number one," Polasek said. "And number two, there's probably better use of that large hangar. That's the largest hangar we have out there and it's not being used for airplanes. It's being used for some small manufacturing in about a quarter of the building and the rest is a bunch of stuff being stored up there. What they do does not require them to be at the airport."

Frakes again disagreed.

"That's a matter of his opinion," Frakes said. "As far as I know, he's never been to our facility."

Frakes said his family are pursuing legal options while at the same time proceeding to move equipment out of their longtime business home.

The problem being, Frakes said, that his company is the sole supplier for several aircraft companies coupled with the difficulties of relocation.

“We’re moving out as quickly as we can,” Frakes said. “We don’t have a place to move as such, but I’m taking all the valuable assets I can.”

That involves moving 38,000 square feet of equipment and materials for starters, Frakes said.

“It’s a mind blowing amount to try to move and keep track of and keep from being damaged, and that’s just the ground floor.”

The upcoming move will present incredible hardship, Frakes said, and a struggle to maintain current orders while absorbing the “tremendous costs” of moving the business and finding a suitable new location.

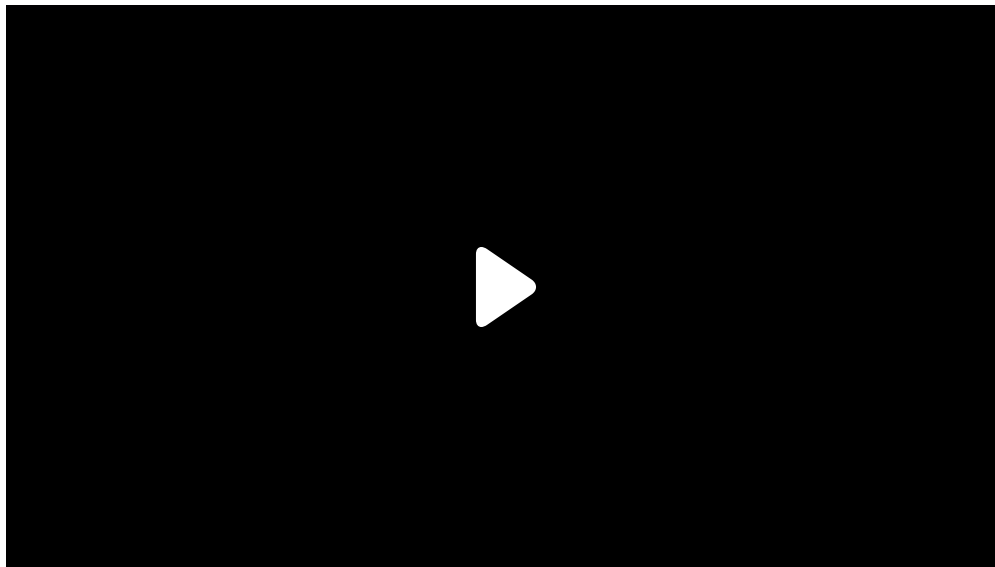
“By law we have to have a Federal Aviation Association approved facility to manufacture aircraft parts, which we have now,” Frakes said. “That approval often takes a year to get. I can’t even change the position of shops within our current building without asking the FAA for permission to do that. So we can’t just pick up and begin manufacturing somewhere else.”

For now, Frakes said, he and his family remain determined to soldier on as the lease deadline looms.

“We made a life working and living here,” Frakes said. “We are committed to keeping our employees employed and finding a way forward. But it’s sad that the city of Cleburne puts little value on the work we do, and our long-standing place in this community.”

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