

# Our readers' top 10 FBOs

## 1 Wilson Air Center (MEM) avg. score 8.339

It defies almost every nook and cranny of convention, but Wilson Air Center celebrates its fifth consecutive top rating in this year's AIN FBO Survey. There have been other dominant FBOs, but none with this kind of consistency. As usual, the answer lies not in one simple formula, but rather in the multifaceted culture and personality of the company and the people behind it.

Owner Bob Wilson, son of Holiday Inn founder Kemmons Wilson, grew up within the service-and-hospitality culture that imbues the entire company. The elder Wilson founded the Holiday Inn motel chain and is credited as the originator of the concept of the modern motel. The concept came to him while on vacation trips with his family, including young Bob, during the early 1950s.

Bob Wilson was bitten early in life by the aviation bug and still loves to fly. He maintains currency in the company's Citation Excel, CJ2 and Pilatus PC-12. He flies a Cessna 210 to commute to Wilson Air Center from his 800-acre property, complete with a 3,500-foot lighted airstrip. He has managed to combine his love of flying with the service-and-hospitality mentality that he grew up

with. The result is Wilson Air Center.

Usually, when such a person decides to establish an FBO, the bean counters run for cover. Most of these labors of love founder, lured from the path of fiscal righteousness by the siren whine of turbofan engines. But through a combination of shrewdness and practicality combined with natural enthusiasm, Wilson has made it not only work but flourish.

Wilson Air Center is a subsidiary of the Kemmons Wilson Companies conglomerate and boasts 125,000 sq ft of hangar area and 32,000 sq ft of office space within its complex. Vice president David Ivey, an industry veteran and a key element in the long-term dominance of Wilson Air Center, said, "We always keep a few spots open for new based customers and transients." Ivey added that Wilson Air Center accommodates a heavy influx of transient pilots and feels the need to strive continuously to keep their best interests in mind.

This year, Ivey told AIN, Wilson has acquired a former Northwest Airlink training building at Memphis International Airport (MEM) and, within 12 months, expects to complete another new 25,000-sq-ft hangar adjacent to that 12,000-sq-ft building. A second 25,000-sq-ft hangar is also part of the long-range plan.

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## tennessee

Memphis	Memphis International (MEM)	Signature	●	●	●	●	●
	Memphis International (MEM)	Wilson Air Center	●	●	●	●	●
Nashville	Nashville International (BNA)	Mercury Air Center	●	●	●	●	●
	Nashville International (BNA)	Signature	●	●	●	●	●

Lin service  
 Pa. amenities  
 Pile amenities  
 Facilities  
**Average**

Ratings (in order of excellence)

- red: 7.750 to 9.000
- green: 7.000 to 7.749
- blue: 6.000 to 6.999
- yellow: 4.000 to 5.999
- black: 0 to 3.999



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Ivey told **AIN** gaining airport approval for new projects is always the hard part. Building the building comes fairly easily for Wilson Air Center. He said, "Besides his involvement in Wilson Air Center, Bob is also the construction guru for the parent company and has built warehouses, time-shares, shopping centers and, of course, hotels and motels."

Bob Wilson has told **AIN**, "We really do operate more like a family than the way most businesses run. Very few people have left here without going somewhere to better themselves, and we're excited when someone from here goes on to become a mechanic or into business for himself. When we have a big uptick in business for whatever reason, we'll call on some of our old employees and they'll drive in from out of town to help out."

To stay involved in current issues affecting business aviation, Wilson also serves on the NBAA's security council.

But the biggest news at Wilson Air Center is really about 450 miles down Victor Airway 54 in Charlotte, N.C. In one of the largest and most involved FBO management contracts ever, Wilson Air Center was selected to operate the general aviation facility at Charlotte-Douglas International Airport (CLT).

The new agreement comes after several years of "close, but no cigar" for Bob Wilson in his efforts to expand his FBO network. Ivey told **AIN**, "Bob's business model has always been three to five facilities. That would provide some of the economy of scale of a chain, without losing control of the

product. The most important element of the negotiations with the Charlotte airport authority was our insistence that we control the level of service, because our brand name is on the door."

The FBO at Charlotte is currently operating from a 7,000-sq-ft temporary terminal building, but Wilson's plans for the facility include a 245-foot-wide "nose-in" arrival canopy to accom-

modate up to six aircraft at a time. Wilson plans to extend the terminal to include a private celebrity lobby, like the one it has in Memphis, and to add 10,000 sq ft of office space. The canopy, building extension and remodeling project are expected to take 12 months to complete.

Ivey is pleased to be in Nascar country and explained to **AIN** that large-aircraft charter associated with the racing teams is one of the bread-and-butter activities at CLT. He said, "In one morning, we had 600 passengers—pit crews and so forth—pass through our terminal in one hour starting at 3 a.m." Part 125 charters in Boeing 757s and Airbus A319s are a regular sight on the ramp at CLT.

So far, Ivey likes what he sees at Charlotte, and so does the airport authority. Ivey said, "We opened on February 1, and in that month we sold 37 percent more fuel than Signature did that month in 2004. We did it by lowering the cost of fuel by \$1.25 and instituting an aggressive home-based discount program."

Still, Ivey said Wilson is always watching its margins closely to maintain a healthy business plan. "In Memphis, we had a record year in 2004. Our margins are up over the year before, and the company is financially sound." So it looks as though Wilson Air Center, either at Memphis or Charlotte, is going to be near the top of the survey heap for years to come.