

Hear How Phil Stenstrom Keeps Your PDX Flight Moving and Skies Quieter

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August 7, 2018







Learn about the two hats our Phil Stenstrom wears in one of many unique jobs at Port of Portland. Hear his revelations on the importance of two miles of airport pavement, the secret sauce of PDX, and what his aptitude tests say he should be.

How would you describe your job to a first grader?

I actually get to have two jobs—Portland International Airport airside operations and noise management. Every first grader agrees that the best parts of air travel are the takeoffs, landings, and the soft drinks. The airside ops team makes takeoffs and landings possible, because runways have to be open, safe, smooth, but not slippery; and a bunch of other stuff. First graders don't usually see noise as much of a problem, but their parents probably do—whether aviation-related or not.

What's the coolest part of your job?

For me right now, it's the amazing people, the airport complexity, my airfield responsibility, and the constant learning. As a manager, it's always rewarding to help people remove obstacles. I've served in aviation information technology, and marine during my Port of Portland career, and I appreciate the interconnections that make this place go. When those break down, I really enjoy the energy and focus of that conflict space. Finally, it has been a profound experience to be involved in our equity work—I'm inspired by the idea that together, we can co-create a future that works better for everyone.

What's one thing about you that would surprise people?

Just about every aptitude test I've taken has suggested I'd be happy as a religious or spiritual leader, and I never understood why. Now, in middle life, I've developed a passion for connection, asking questions, and embracing seemingly contradictory ideas that makes me think it might not be a radical shift.

What do you do in your spare time?

I say my highest priority is reserving time and mental space to spend with family and friends, but my actions show that's not the case—so that's a challenge to work on. Last year about this time, I was finishing up my Rotary Peace Fellowship studies in Thailand, and I continue to deepen my learning and promote peaceful change here, locally. I have a fitness program that's designed around the winter biathlon season, so during the summers I like less-structured exercise like backpacking.

What should everyone know about airports?

Everyone should know that building two miles of road lets you drive for two miles, yet building two miles of runway connects you to any airport in the world. It's an ingenious global network.

There are many ways to view airports. From a process perspective, PDX is an enormous machine with passengers, aircraft, vehicles and bags as inputs and outputs, synchronized across different frequencies and volumes. Keeping the linkages balanced and fault-tolerant, with an eye on customer service and cost, is not for the faint of heart—and our ops team does it every day.

Industry people are fond of saying, "If you've seen one airport, you've seen one airport." While that probably overstates airport uniqueness, it is true that we have a secret sauce here that's hard to replicate. That's because the secret is actually our people and their commitment to PDX.