

# Best Practices in FBO Management: High Density Operations

**I**n the wake of the recent Republican and Democratic National Conventions in Cleveland and Philadelphia respectively, there was an obvious story the news media missed entirely: How busy the surrounding airports and by extension the local FBOs were during the events. Occasionally referred to as “High Density Operations” in FBO industry parlance, special events such the presidential inauguration, the Super Bowl, the Final Four and yes, the aforementioned conventions, require an enormous amount of planning on an FBO’s part.



Planes lined up at the Cleveland Jet Center during the recent Republican National Convention in Cleveland.  
Cleveland Jet Center

A similar amount of planning is required at the airport level to smoothly handle the influx of aircraft associated with a special event, especially when that influx is expressed in the hundreds. By way of example, it's not unusual for an airport to experience 200, 300, or more business and general aviation aircraft arriving and parking for major events- in addition to its standard complement of air traffic.

Moreover, most of these special events are "compression" type operations, meaning the event itself is only three to four hours or so. This dynamic means hundreds of aircraft will arrive in a 24-36 hour period preceding the event and then want to depart simultaneously after the event. How then, does an FBO plan for the impending mayhem?

While the checklist for an FBO handling a special event is longer than can be properly described in a brief article, a few best practices are worth mentioning. First, though it's usually folly to start with an assumption as the basis of planning, it applies to special events. An FBO is wise to assume that they need to start planning

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early- very early. A year or more is not unusual to begin the initial planning meetings with local airport stakeholders for special events- administrators, tower, Tracon, and customs, to name a few. Airport administrators may need to plan to shut down taxiways or events other runways for aircraft parking- not an easy task if not planned ahead. Secondly, an FBO

should assume the existing procedures they use to handle their standard, daily complement of transient traffic will break down and fail in a high density event. For example, if an FBO dispatches fuel orders from a front desk in the lobby of their FBO via a customer service representative, or alternatively, has line service fuel aircraft as they receive requests ramp side, these methodologies will fail when hundreds of fuel or service requests are fed into that system. FBOs will want to centralize service and fuel dispatching in a dedicated area away from customers behind the curtains so to speak- a nerve center of sorts.

FBOs will also need to bring in additional employees and equipment to handle event traffic. While the former may seem difficult for an independent FBO with one location, the reality is the FBO industry as a whole comes together in these situations. The subculture of FBOs means that an independent FBO in Florida for example, likely has FBO industry friends in California, Arizona and Washington, and just by putting the word out early, those far afield and unaffiliated FBOs will happily send their employees to work in Florida for a few days. It is a badge of honor for an FBO employee to work special event and to be chosen to assist a distant FBO and wear a different uniform for a few days is special indeed. In terms of equipment, FBOs should plan to lease additional equipment, such as tugs, passenger vans, fuel trucks and if in the winter, deicing units just in case. With respect to fuel trucks, they'll need to arrive early, as several inspections are usually required prior to entry into services, such as those from the airport fire department, or that state's department of weights and measures.

Speaking of fueling, it is highly recommended that an FBO request its customers receive fuel on arrival as opposed to departure. Due to their flight department's SOPs, many flight crews are required to be present for aircraft fueling. To that end, and especially with compression-type events, fueling on arrival will prevent delays that could become hours long on departure- no matter how many additional employees or fuel trucks the FBO used to augment their operation.

Finally, an FBO must consider the softer side of customer service during a high density event. While the logistical details of event planning tend to focus on personnel, equipment and

infrastructure, proper care of passengers and pilots alike is paramount. As most- but not all- business aircraft are flown with two pilots, and special events can easily attract 300 aircraft on the ground at any one time, the loose translation means an FBO could have 300-600 pilots milling about in their lobby a few hours before departure. Rare is the FBO lobby designed to handle such numbers, so an FBO should plan to dedicate a nearby hangar as an additional seating area- complete with complimentary beverages and snacks, and if say, the event is the Super Bowl, a large projection screen TV to provide flight crews visibility as to the game's timing- and outcome. Similarly, as many will arrive a night or two before an event, FBOs should arrange hotel room blocks with nearby hotels a year in advance of the event or more. Other "soft" considerations such as additional refrigeration for aircraft catering, large volume coffee urns, and hundreds and hundreds of bags of ice- or a second ice machine on the premises is also warranted.

While complex, high density operations can be some of the most rewarding and memorable experiences for FBO personnel and flight crews alike. Planning, patience and the understanding that regardless of the depth of either something will go wrong, makes for much needed levity during an otherwise stressful time for an FBO. For those desirous to learn more about a handling high density special events, the National Business Aviation Association often holds educational sessions at their annual Business Aircraft Conference and Exposition (NBAA-BACE) each year in which speakers comprised of FBOs and aircraft operators provide lessons learned, tips for future events, and answer questions about the previous year's events. To learn more, visit  <https://www.nbaa.org/events/>

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