Ernest H. Renzel Jr., businessman, civic leader and aviation enthusiast, is known as the “Father of San José Airport.” Without his vision, this Silicon Valley economic engine likely would not exist today.

The airfield – the runways and the land – is named for Renzel, who led the public campaign to build an airport in San Jose to attract airline service. He later served as mayor and chairman of the San José Airport Commission.

Born in 1907 as a third-generation San Josean, Renzel graduated from Stanford University and joined the family’s wholesale grocery business.

In the late 1930s, he headed the Citizens Airport Committee in a campaign to “get San José out of the horse-and-buggy class.” The committee found 483 acres a couple miles north of downtown San José for a new airport site.

Renzel negotiated the sale to the city for $300 an acre in 1939 and led a tax campaign to finance the purchase. Development was delayed during World War II.

In 1944, Renzel was elected to the San José City Council and served as council president (mayor). After the war, the council decided to develop the airfield. The first commercial airliner flew into San José Municipal Airport on February 1, 1949 when a Southwest Airways DC-3 landed on its way to Los Angeles. San José’s political and business establishment was on hand for the airport dedication, with Renzel as master of ceremonies.

Renzel later served on the San José Airport Commission for eight years, including a term as chairman.

In December 2003, the city council voted unanimously to name the airfield “Ernie Renzel Field” in his honor.

Renzel died in 2007 at age 100.