Looking Back: A Perspective on the Annual Forum
By Mike Hirschberg, VFS Executive Director

With the dawn of a new decade, we’ve been taking a look back at how things have changed since the beginning of the 21st Century. Like everything else, this series has now taken a new perspective given the impact of the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Forum 76 to Be Virtual
Last year’s 75th Annual Forum & Technology Display set a high-water mark in terms of number of papers, attendees and invited speakers. Returning to the historic city of Philadelphia, the site of the first Annual Forum in 1945, the diamond jubilee celebrated the past, present and future of vertical flight. After this special four-day tour de force, Forum 76 was supposed to be a “return to normalcy.” The novel coronavirus has, of course, made this year’s Annual Forum anything but — as announced in July, the 76th Annual Forum will be virtual.

The agonizing decision to move the Forum online was made after careful consideration of all the factors, including the COVID health risks, the results of a detailed survey, and organizational travel policies that would have prevented attendance from most of those in the in the US government, academia, many companies and nearly everyone outside the US — 58% of survey respondents indicated that their organization would not have permitted their attendance.

In hindsight, the decision to go virtual appears obvious. But in June, we had been still hoping for positive global trends in the pandemic; the local situation for Virginia Beach was improving and the state of Virginia was allowing gatherings of up to 250 people.

Since then, we have been designing an exceptional virtual event for Forum 76. The technical papers will be held on the same days and times originally planned, Oct. 6-8, and other activities moved to Monday, Oct. 5, or the preceding weeks in September. With the success of many similar virtual conferences and exhibits over the past several months, web meeting technology has shown itself as a viable alternative to face-to-face events. VFS has also proven our ability to hold very successful online webinars — with more than 20 events held in March through July (see the VFS Video Library at www.vtol.org/videos) using GoToWebinar — and several more planned prior to the virtual Forum 76.

For Forum 76, we’ve invested in a virtual platform, eventScribe, that we expect will provide an excellent experience for Forum attendees and exhibitors, and our 230 papers in 40 technical sessions will be delivered over our proven GoToWebinar platform on eventScribe. The technical program will be complemented by VIP speakers in our special sessions; the head of Marine Corps Aviation as the keynote; top executives from the leading five Western rotorcraft manufacturers in our annual CEO panel; and extensive unopposed exhibit hall hours. Our 76th Annual Awards Program and 40th Annual Nikolsky Lecture will both be broadcast to the public on our YouTube channel on Sept. 30, and other events, such as our two short courses and our many committee meetings, will be held earlier in September.

We know that the personal interactions at the Annual Forum are sometimes just as important as the learning opportunities in the presentations, so we are leaving ample time for networking and discussions, through real-time online commenting during the briefings as well as dedicated networking chat room times to connect with other attendees.

An online event now means that more people will have the opportunity to participate without the time and expense of travel. We also cut our regular registration rates in half to maximize the ability of our members to participate in this (hopefully) once-in-a-lifetime virtual Forum. With much of the world working remotely, we hope that more people than ever will be able connect to Forum 76 presentations and other participants. In addition, all presentations will be recorded and made available to all Forum 76 registrants for up to a year after the Forum.

All the details and registration information are posted at www.vtol.org/Forum.

20 Years of Forum Growth...
In the first 40 years of the Annual Forum, the number of pages in the Forum Proceedings grew steadily from around 200 each year to about 1,000 pages in 1985. With the increasing ease of writing using word processors, this had doubled by the late 1990s. Beginning in 1998, Forum papers were processed online through our Mira vendor, which made Forum Proceedings CDs possible, though four-volume sets of printed proceedings were still in high demand for another decade (and can still be acquired today for those who want them).

Over the course of our first 55 years (through 1999), the Annual Forums had published just over 3,000 papers that totaled some 40,000 pages. In contrast, more have been published in just the past 20 years: 1,800 papers (an average of 180 papers annually) and 25,000 pages in the first decade, and 2,500 papers (averaging 250 papers) and 32,000 pages the second decade. All totaled, our online Vertical Flight Library today has more than 13,000 PDF documents available — with 7,300 Forum papers totaling nearly 100,000 pages!
I had the distinct honor and pleasure to be tapped in 2006 to be the Forum 64 Technical Chair, held in Montréal in April-May 2008. Before that, however, I was the first person ever appointed as a Forum Deputy Chair Forum Deputy Chair, serving under NASA’s Susan Gorton, for Forum 63. I recall saying many times that it was a wonder that it had taken more than 60 years to come up with the position. But looking through the data, it’s obvious that the event that had grown over the years to the point where additional help and on-the-job-training were clearly needed. The Forum continued to grow in number of papers, technical sessions, invited speakers and ancillary activities, such as short courses, student events and more.

Last year’s four-day 75th Annual Forum & Technology Display celebrated the growth and evolution of VFS and the entire vertical flight community. The event broke all records with the number of technical papers (281), total invited speakers (75) and attendees (1,400).

With such a groundswell of enthusiasm and momentum — and the highly anticipated return to Montréal — Forum 76 was expected to build on last year’s success. Although COVID-19 has robbed us of the chance to enjoy such an exceptional destination, we are still able to meet online and continue the Forum’s tradition as the biggest and best vertical flight technical event in the world. With a virtual platform, we still hope that a record number of attendees will benefit from our signature event.

...Not Without Past Struggles

Although not on the same scale as the impacts that the coronavirus has had on Forum 76 or the world, many of the Forums over the past 20 years have also had their trials and tribulations.

In addition to the impacts of the Sept. 11, 2001 tragedy on the global psyche, past pandemics — such as the 2002-03 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the H5N1 “bird flu” that peaked in 2005, the 2009 “swine flu” caused by the H1N1 virus (the same as the 1918 “Spanish flu” pandemic), and the 2012 Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) — also impacted the ability for attendees to travel. (It should be noted that as a result of these past pandemics, passenger jet filtration systems were significantly improved, making airline travel much safer in the current environment.)

Political events also had an impact on participation, such as the relations of the US and other countries with Russia after the annexation of Ukraine’s Crimean peninsula, and the increasing difficulty of Chinese citizens securing visas to the US. The drawdown of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the massive cutbacks in wartime production of helicopters resulted in reductions in personnel, as well as overhead budgets for training and marketing.

However, the US government travel restrictions that started in 2012 and the US budget sequestration in 2013 had even greater impacts.

In the wake of a General Services Administration (GSA) travel scandal, in 2012, the Obama Administration directed that all agencies reduce spending on conferences, travel and other “administrative costs” by 30% to eliminate what were seen as unnecessary taxpayer expenses (see ”Commentary: US Government Actions: A False Economy in a High-Tech World,” Vertiflite, May/June 2013). Unfortunately, the additional tracking and approvals created a bureaucratic nightmare that may have actually increased overall costs. It took three years for the Administration — after significant outreach by VFS and many other associations — to clarify that these restrictions were not intended to cover scientific and technical conferences, and allowed the delegation of approval authority to reasonable levels.

However, the US Army had taken an even harder stance. Beginning with the canceled 13th Biennial Helicopter Military Operations Technology (HELMOT XIII) in October 2012, the Army severely curtailed travel to draconian levels.

Then, the Congressionally mandated sequestration budget cuts went into effect March 1, 2013 — just two months before Forum 69 — grounding US Air Force planes, reducing the number of US Navy/Marine Corps ships setting sail, keeping the US Army from conducting non-essential training, etc. Only three US Defense Department employees were able to attend the Forum that year. This was certainly a low point in the much-needed collaboration between industry, academia and government to advance vertical flight that is the raison d’être for VFS. This was especially disappointing since the Future Vertical Lift program had only recently gotten underway (after many years of advocacy by VFS and industry — see www.vtol.org/FVL) and the US government was cut off from face-to-face discussions with industry (years before web conferencing became widely available).

Even when the restrictions were eased in 2015, Army leadership was still averse towards approving its technical workforce to attend technical conferences. Prior to the government travel restrictions in 2012, the Army typically sent more than 125 engineers and scientists to the Annual Forum, for more than 200 total US government attendees. That has never fully recovered but today, Army personnel account for 40-50% of the approximately 130 US government employees who attend every year.

This year’s virtual Forum 76 provides the opportunity for much greater attendance by government personnel and everyone. We hope that this will allow for a much fuller engagement between industry, academia and government, through the technical and VIP presentations, as well as the discussions with our Technology Display exhibitors and our networking sessions. Many virtual events over the past several months have proven that Forum 76 can be a great experience, particularly if everyone makes the extra effort to connect with other attendees.

Virtually the Best

The Annual Forum provides the premier venue for learning, networking and working together to advance vertical flight. This year is no different in its mission. As the vertical flight community has shown through its first three-quarters of a century, there are many, many challenges and obstacles to overcome.

But overcome them we shall.

What do you think? Let me know at director@vtol.org.