

# Aurora airport businesses looking for sustainability

Patrick Johnson, Canby Herald  
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One of the concerns that came out of the Aurora State Airport master planning process was how expansion would intrude into farmland.

The Aurora airport advocacy group, Positive Aurora Airport Management, has come up with several ideas on how not only to increase the amount of farmland around the airport, but also add green energy solutions to the airport.

"There have been a couple of us that have been thinking of ideas of how we could be good neighbors with the farmers," said Tony Helbling, president of PAAM and director of helicopter flight operations at Wilson Construction. "This is an idea that is being used at other airports and would actually give the farming community a net increase in farmland around the airport."

And state aviation officials are listening.

"At this point we are just investigating," said Mitch Swecker, director of the Oregon Aviation Department. "We do that at other airports and it could work at Aurora."

The plan would be to lease property at the south end of the airport, especially if the Federal Aviation Administration requires the state to extend the runway south. That requirement would mean the state would have to purchase not only farmland, but approximately four homes in Deercreek Estates to meet safety requirements. The state will not know the FAA's ruling for a few months, while they review the finalized master plan document, Swecker said.

At the Mulino State Airport, outside of Molalla, the state currently has an agreement with a hay farmer to knock down the tall grass around the rural airport along Highway 213. Swecker said that the state gets the benefit of not having to mow, while the farmer is able to harvest hay. However, to make sure the deal is fair, Swecker said he has put out a request for proposals to make sure the state is getting the best deal possible.

"We don't have irrigation rights around many of our airports," Swecker said. "So it has to be a crop that doesn't require watering, like hay, grass seed or turf. It would be neat to get a vineyard, they don't take irrigation."

The idea, circulated by Ted Millar, president of Southend Corporate Airpark, was to help to assuage the concerns of local residents and farmland protection advocates.

"My goal is to have the airport be a good neighbor and help with regional economic development," Millar said told The Spokesman last month. "If we can give more farmland,

and increase the opportunities at the airport, that's a win for everyone."

But farmland advocates tentatively support the plan.

"I don't know any of the details, and the devil is in the details," said Ben Williams, president of Friends of French Prairie, a farmland protection group. "The ODA has talked to us about if they get the money and if they acquired the land that they would lease the property to farmers like they do at other airports. In theory it sounds good, but the devil is in the details."

Williams questions whether "a farmer sitting on a John Deere would want to farm while a Gulfstream takes off," and wondered if the state's portion of the land would be "unusable or undesirable."

Going green?

Helbling said that with the state recently clearing out trees and other obstructions, the flat-topped hanger roofs would be a perfect spot for solar panels.

"ODOT just built the solar array at (Interstate) 5 and I-205," Helbling said. "Plus the solar panel project has started at Baldock. We want to know if something like that would work at the Aurora Airport."

Swecker said he has started investigating this idea too, having recently attended a conference on green energy.

"The thing is it needs to have some sort of subsidies to make it economically viable," he said. "But we are looking into different programs."

While some might think that solar panels would create glare for pilots as they land, Swecker said that the technology has improved over the past five years where the photo-voltaic panels don't have glare.

"We looked at it out in Joseph, Ore., and at that time they didn't have the technology to keep the glare down," he said. "You can get nonglare solar panels now."

Swecker said that the Warrenton-Astoria Regional Airport currently uses small wind turbines that look like small fans, to generate power.

"Right now we are just beginning to talk about this," Swecker said. "We would like to do something, but right now we are looking at the best way to go that would give us savings and be viable for our airports."

A number of California airports currently use solar panels or wind turbines, including San Francisco International Airport, Long Beach Airport, Fresno Yosemite International Airport and Oakland International Airport, according to the Solar Energy Industries Association.