

# A LETTER OF CONCERN

Wilsonville Spokesman

Corey Buchanan, Tuesday, January 16, 2018

## **City of Wilsonville expresses uneasiness about Aurora Airport legislation and the potential traffic impacts it might bring**

Potentially in unison with Clackamas County, the City of Wilsonville is expected to deliver a draft letter this month to Oregon Senate President Peter Courtney (D-Salem) and House Speaker Tina Kotek (D-Portland) expressing concern about a bill — which could be introduced in the Oregon State Legislature's February "short" session — that would "circumvent standard Oregon land-use and public process laws to allow a special interest to 'carve-out' to extend the runway at the Aurora State Airport," according to a draft of the letter obtained by the Spokesman.

The City of Wilsonville approved the letter Jan. 4 and sent it to the Clackamas County Board of Commissioners — which will then review the letter and determine whether to sign on. The letter could be revised before it's sent to state legislators.

Wilsonville City Council discussed the concept bill at length during a meeting Dec. 18. "I have met with several different entities and communicated the opinion that we think it's not appropriate to have a legislative action to make an end run around Oregon land use process that would normally allow stakeholders to be part of the decision process but that's exactly what this legislation proposes," Knapp said at the meeting.

Multiple city councilors expressed concern that an airport extension could lead to increased traffic in the Wilsonville area. "On a basic level I think back to our community survey that we do every year. The big theme from that is people are concerned about traffic. So that's all of the people that live in Wilsonville and come into work in Wilsonville, commute in, commute out. I think that has to be carefully considered, what this issue might do," Councilor Kristin Akervall said.

The legislative concept, which was put forth by Rep. Rick Lewis (R-Silverton), posits that the Aurora Airport, which is the largest state-owned airport in Oregon and employs 1,200 people, needs additional investment in order to "maintain aviation safety and commercial viability" and that the current runway is "inadequate and unsafe."

The current runway is 5,004 feet and, according to the Aurora Airport Improvement Association, the airport is the state's third busiest and ranks 31st in terms of runway length. This plan has been in the works since the 1976 Aurora Airport Master Plan proposed increasing the runway length to 6,000 feet — which is also the proposed length in the updated master plan.

The concept bill proposes to extend the airport's boundaries, add or expand airport taxi areas and add new or expand facilities for aviation related equipment.

The letter from the City of Wilsonville says the proposed bill would set a precedent that parties who "seek special treatment" should go directly to the legislature rather than go through the goal exception process in order to pass legislation. Lewis said he wasn't sure exactly what legislative steps the bill would be avoiding but that he assumes the process would include public hearings.

Ben Williams of Friends of French Prairie was not happy when he caught wind of the bill's legislative concept when he spoke with the Spokesman in December. "If the public was fully informed about A, what has happened, and B, the scope of the consequences, you can bet that the majority would be opposed to it because of the consequences and the precedent," he said.

Lewis, however, says that an extensive public process took place during the crafting of the Aurora Airport Master Plan, which was updated in 2013, and would rather not use more state money and prolong the project's implementation.

He added that additional public hearings will take place if the legislative concept becomes a bill and is assigned to a committee. "Had the state not done a recent master plan update and this bill hadn't had public hearings, there would need to be more of a public process involved but that's all been done," Lewis said.

According to the Aurora Airport Master Plan, the current runway of 5,004 feet accommodates all small aircrafts with fewer than 10 passenger seats but larger aircraft require a longer runway. Also, the runway's shorter length constrains about 500 flights a year and forces them to "eliminate fuel and cargo to take off and land," according to the Aurora Airport Improvement Association.

The airport extension could allow corporate jets to take off at the airport. According to the master plan, the extension would cost over \$3 million. Lewis is not sure why Wilsonville has raised concerns.

"As far as Wilsonville, I don't know (why) because they stand to benefit if larger corporate jets are able to land there. Corporate jets are less noisy. I would think people would look for lodging, restaurants in Wilsonville, so I'm not really sure what their issues are," he said.

Before the bill had been released, Wilsonville Chamber of Commerce CEO Kevin Ferrasci O'Malley said the WACC would likely support it. "The Aurora Airport is a member in good standing of the Wilsonville Chamber of Commerce. Our stated WACC vision is to create and promote economic vitality for business in the south metro region," the chamber wrote in a statement. "Historically, the WACC has fully supported efforts to help the Aurora airport realize its potential. It's a powerful local generator of economic development and jobs to Wilsonville and the surrounding local area."

O'Malley says talks of massive changes regarding the airport are overblown. "There are comments being made about it becoming an Orange County Airport by simply having a runway safety zone," he said. "That's not happening. It's fear mongering. This is allowing the small business aircrafts that are landing and taking off to do so more efficiently. That's what it's about."

Aurora Airport Improvement Association board member Tony Helbing, says the airport currently provides ample economic benefits to surrounding communities and the extension will increase the positive impact. Helbing also says businesses are more likely to use the Aurora Airport if a safer runway is implemented. "It's important to know that as we want this runway extension, it has to do with our choice to be in business and that business we choose to do here has big ripple impacts into the surrounding community," Helbing said.

Williams believes the benefits of the expansion are more limited. "At the end of the day, the beneficiaries are developers who can have larger airport, larger jets, sell more fuel and more hangars," Williams said. "A few people are going to make a lot of money and there will be a few employment jobs working at aircraft hangars or pumping fuel but that doesn't translate to a lot of

benefits for say Wilsonville or the city of Aurora. Most of the economic benefit goes to a small number of businesses and developers."

The Wilsonville letter also addresses concerns regarding "a lack of transportation options in the area," "unfair competition to adjacent jurisdictions," "environmental concerns" and "potential harm to the important agriculture economic cluster brought about by increased land-speculation and difficulty in conducting farming operations."

Additionally, the letter posits that the proposed legislation is too large and significant to be deliberated at the "short" 35-day February session, which will begin Feb. 5.