

Airport meeting draws crowd of nearly 100

State is seeking public input on different Aurora State Airport proposals

Patrick Johnson
March 16, 2011



Photo By: Patrick Johnson

Ted Millar, owner of the Southend Airpark and the Aurora Jet Center, left, Tony Holt, of the Charbonneau homeowners association, and Bruce Bennett, owner of Aurora Aviation, left, all attended an Aurora State Airport planning meeting last week. The three men are on different sides of the airport issue and the meeting attracted nearly 100 people to the North Marion Intermediate School.

AURORA — Only the consultants and state planning staff know what the recommendation will include on whether the Aurora State Airport should expand in the next 20 years.

Chris Cummings, an Oregon Department of Aviation planner, said after the Thursday night meeting at North Marion Intermediate School that he will be working with consultants at WH Pacific to devise the “preferred alternative.” It will be released by March 31.

The state will continue to accept testimony on the airport until March 23.

“We thought we would have gotten a little more consensus last night,” Cummings said Friday. “We are going to wait and see what we get in the written communications to see if there are some themes.”

Cummings plans to present the preferred alternative to the State Aviation Board on March 31 during its meeting in Salem. He isn’t sure if a draft report will be available before the meeting, however.

State planners and consultants are trying to weigh the concerns of local residents and jurisdictions with the needs of the airport and its users, he added.

"I expect both sides will be upset with us when this is done," Cummings said. "We will have to wait and see."

Nearly 100 attend meeting

The latest Planning Advisory Committee (PAC) meeting drew the largest crowd yet, with nearly 100 people in attendance from Charbonneau, Deer Creek Estates, Wilsonville, Aurora and interested business owners and pilots from the Aurora State Airport.

Noise, protecting farmland, fumes from jets taking off and impact to airport users were among the many topics addressed. Both Charbonneau and Friends of French Prairie submitted petitions, voicing their concerns over airport expansion.

"The concern we basically have is our quality of life," said Brian Mulby of Deer Creek Estates. "With the noise and the fumes from the jets taking off there, it's come to the point where you cannot sit on the patio without being disturbed by taking off aircraft. We do support the tower and the fire station."

Many agreed with Mulby that the proposed tower and expanded fire station are logical additions.

The tower, though, is not part of the master planning process and instead is under study by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Most of the discussion Thursday focused on surface traffic concerns and the condition of Airport Road, which runs parallel to the state's third-busiest airport.

"Airport Road needs to be fixed," said Aurora Fire Board Chairman Fred Netter, adding that if Clackamas County is willing to spend money to help Multnomah County fix the Sellwood Bridge, it should also be willing to help repair Airport Road, which receives the majority of its traffic from Clackamas County.

Clackamas County Commissioner Charlotte Lehan said that her county isn't included in the analysis of impact, especially in surface traffic.

Impact of traffic and land use implications

"There is nothing we can do in only one county or only the other county," Lehan said. "This is a joint project and as much as it would be nice to shut Clackamas County out of this, it is just not possible. We are partners here."

Lehan said Clackamas County has not taken an official position on the airport, except to express concern about the surface transportation and land use impacts of expansion of the airport and the need to gather more information.

Airport business owners Bruce Bennett and Ted Millar want to see extensions to the runway, with Bennett saying he doesn't support any development off of the airport property.

In the end, the PAC remained split on whether the runway should be extended or strengthened, or if the airport should simply add a control tower.

Steve Hurst, the PAC's representative from the city of Wilsonville, has been critical of the process in the past and has concerns about airport expansion. At the meeting, he said he doesn't have an opinion about the "preferred alternative" until the city council has a chance to discuss it and that the city will provide its testimony in writing, if appropriate.

Aurora Mayor James Meirow said he wants to hear public testimony and didn't offer an opinion on the alternatives. He didn't return calls Friday for comment.

Reaction mixed

After the meeting, many PAC members said they were curious about how the state and consultants will boil down the information and decide on a "preferred alternative."

"I think the testimony was pretty lopsided," said Bennett, who owns Aurora Aviation.

"It's disappointing to see so many people that are misinformed."

He thought progress had been made on educating the public about the control tower, he said, with much of the testimony in favor of tower construction. Comments about "taxpayer money" being used to expand the runway and other airport improvements just aren't true, he said.

"We support the airport through fuel taxes for our aircraft," Bennett said. "To suggest we are pulling income tax dollars in to upgrade the airport just isn't accurate."

Bennett said he is "mildly confident" that state officials will find a good balance.

"There is not going to be a rush of development," he said. "This is a 20-year plan."

Rick Kosta, a PAC member who represents Deer Creek Estates, said Friday that he would be happy if there was some sort of compromise and urged the state to go with a "no build" option during the meeting.

"There are a lot of people who stand to make a lot of money on this," Kosta said Friday.

"Hopefully they will take everyone's testimony and come up with something we can live

with. I am not against the progress, but to suggest that this is the only place they could expand most definitely isn't true."

Others who are concerned about airport growth, such as Clackamas County and Friends of French Prairie, said they have little confidence that their issues are going to be addressed. Lehan said she will ask the Clackamas County Commission whether it wants to weigh in on the issue and submit their opinion to the state before the March 23 deadline.

"There is nothing that would give me confidence," Lehan said. "I would like to be pleasantly surprised about this."