

Interest groups wait for next step in Aurora State Airport process

Woodburn Independent
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July 6, 2011



Tony Helbling, director of helicopter flight operations with Wilson Construction, says he is happy about the Oregon Department of Aviation's decision to lengthen the runway at the Aurora State Airport.

AURORA — Wait and see.

That's the sentiment of a number of interest groups involved in how the Aurora State Airport grows over the next 20 years.

In June, the Oregon State Aviation Board voted unanimously to extend the Aurora State Airport. Now, the board waits to see whether its limited-use plan will be approved by the Federal Aviation Administration or if the federal regulators will require a 1,000-foot runway extension to the south.

Interests groups from around the area weighed in on the decision last week and emotions ranged from angry to ecstatic about the board's decision to include some sort of extension in the airport master plan.

Aviation board chairman Mark Gardiner said now the Planning Advisory Committee will discuss both an airport layout plan and a capital projects plan before the master plan is sent to the FAA for approval, most likely in September.

The plan will include the use of displaced thresholds, or areas that pilots can use for extra runway length when taking off, and for emergencies either taking off or landing.

The use of the limited runway extensions also doesn't require the rules about building setbacks and heights as would a full runway extension.

The FAA's Seattle office has indicated it will consider the use of the limited runways as full extensions and not pay for the project or allow the state to loosen the rules.

That hasn't stopped Gardiner, however, from pushing the plan forward.

"The displaced thresholds are our plan A that we are going to the FAA with," he said last week.

"The airport constituents are in favor of it, aviation officials think it's the right thing to do, it doesn't go outside the footprint of the current airport and meets many of the goals of the neighbors.

"We are wholeheartedly going after the displaced thresholds; it's not a straw man to get a 1,000-foot extension to the south."

That's great news for airport users.

"The fact is that the larger planes that this plan will allow are already coming here," said Tony Helbling, director of helicopter flight operations with Wilson Construction, which has an operation on the south end of the airport with several helicopters, a twin-engine, turbo-prop King Air and a Cessna Citation business jet. "This will allow those bigger planes to fuel up and increase the economic development at the airport. The next size of plane up is the Boeings and those will never come here."

While Helbling sees the economic benefits of the state's plan, Jeff Ward sees something different — more safety.

"If I have a choice to use a runway that is closer and more convenient with 3,000 feet, or go a little out of my way and use a runway that is 6,000 feet, I would use the 6,000 foot runway," said Ward, standing in Wilson Construction's hangar. "If I blow a tire, lose an engine or hit an animal on the runway, I want that extra space to stop. I want to go home to my family at the end of the day."

Ward said he's "very happy" with the board decision and prefers the 1,000 feet extension, but even 800 feet in his eyes is an improvement.

Paul Bazeley, owner of AeroMetal International, said that while he doesn't fly jets, the extra runway could be a boon for his business.

"My whole business is built on word of mouth," he said. "More traffic means I will get more business. This is great for my business."

You can hear the frustration in Clackamas County Commissioner Jim Bernard's voice when you ask him about the board decision.

"I think the whole process was a sham," he said.

"Despite the advisory committee advising no extension, the aeronautics folks didn't think that was enough so they said they needed to extend the runway. Why bother having a public process if that is what they were going to do from the start?"

Bernard questioned why the PAC was given only one chapter at a time, and why the "preferred alternative" changed from no extension to the use of displaced thresholds to 1,000 feet of runway over the course of the process.

"(Clackamas County) really had no part in the process but to sit at a table and let ODA

decide what they were going to decide anyway," he said.

Issues about surface traffic impacts and the migration of smaller planes to the Mulino Airport were not discussed, he said, both directly impacting Clackamas County.

"We don't have the infrastructure — roads or otherwise — in Mulino to serve the amount of small planes that could end up out there," he said.

Bernard said he'll discuss with the Clackamas County Commission about investigating legal remedies the county could take because of the "flawed process."

Ben Williams, president of Friends of French Prairie, repeated his concern that any development south of the Willamette River could lead to building sprawl reaching from Portland to Salem along the Interstate 5 corridor.

"Our view would be that what we are facing now is everyone is folding up their tents and letting the FAA take the process over and make the decision," he said.

"We don't believe there is adequate data to support the need to extend the runway. Surveys about constrained operations are so subjective and anecdotal that I don't believe they would stand up to any scrutiny. At the end of the day, this was a poor way to spend taxpayer money."

Williams said while he appreciates the ODA's attempt to find a workaround position with the use of displaced thresholds, at the end of the day the aviation interests won out.

"We have been in contact with our members of Congress and they are keeping an eye on this, they want to protect farmland as well, so we will see what happens," Williams said.

OAB's Gardiner said that he's still working on how to get the message to the FAA that most of the stakeholders still prefer the displaced threshold option.

"We are still working on how to go about that, whether we include letters of support with the master plan or see how they rule and then appeal if necessary," he said.

"It's early and we are serious about this effort and want to be as effective as possible when dealing with the FAA."

Ted Millar, owner of Southend Airpark, said while he would be happy either way the FAA rules he feels it's important to continue to address the neighbor's concerns.

"We have met with them and want to continue to talk about the ways we can work together to get something that works for everyone," Millar said. "We are all in this together and the displaced threshold works fine with us."