

No runway extension recommended for Aurora State Airport

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Woodburn Independent, April 6, 2011



Wilsonville Mayor Tim Knapp (right) testifies at the Oregon State Aviation Board meeting Thursday about the 20-year plan for the Aurora State Airport. Planners have recommended not extending the runway at this time, but strengthening the runway to handle heavier corporate jets.

SALEM – It looks like master planners for the Aurora State Airport had a few tricks up their sleeves after all.

The recommendation by the Oregon Department of Aviation (ODA) not to extend the runway surprised many people following the process who fully expected just the opposite.

In their minds, the question really was just how long they would make the runway.

At last Thursday morning's Oregon State Aviation Board meeting, planners revealed the "recommended alternative" by Oregon Department of Aviation planners and its consultant, WH Pacific, which didn't include the expected runway extension.

"Quite honestly I am surprised," said Tony Holt, vice president of the Charbonneau Homeowners Association.

He's a member of the state's Planning Advisory Committee looking at the latest version of the master plan. "I am happy with this right now. I still believe it is a constrained airport and they shouldn't spend money there, but this is better than we expected."

Among the recommendations:

- * Strengthen the Aurora runway to support planes up to 60,000 pounds with dual-wheel gear. Currently, the runway supports up to 45,000 pounds. The state allowed an increase in the size of the planes that can use the airport to support some of the larger corporate jets already using the airport.

- * Create a run-up area at the north end of the runway that allows planes to check their systems before takeoff.

- * Reduce visual approach requirements. Planes approaching the airport from the north still need more than a mile of visibility to land. Planes coming from the south end can land with less than a mile visibility.

Currently, aircraft from the north must have at least 1 1/4 miles of visibility. Those from the south need at least one mile.

If the recommendations are approved by the board and the Federal Aviation Administration, the state most likely would look at purchasing approximately four manufactured homes on the west side of Highway 551 to meet safety requirements.

"We would most likely wait until those properties became available and then try to purchase them," said ODA planner Chris Cummings, adding that property to the south of the airport also would need to be purchased, but farming can continue.

Wilsonville Mayor Tim Knapp, who testified during the meeting, said he's happy with the outcome but will maintain a watchful eye on the process as it moves forward.

"I still think there are some concerns with the option they are putting forward," he said after the meeting. "However, I do think this alternative takes into account many of the concerns neighborhoods have raised during this process when you compare it to an extension of the runway to the north."

Knapp expects "airport interests" will continue lobbying aviation board members before the final recommendation vote on April 21.

The ODA still is accepting public comment.

Former Aurora mayor Nick Kaiser, a PAC member representing the city of Aurora, said he wouldn't comment until he could discuss the recommendations with city leaders.

Ted Millar, owner of Southend Airpark at the Aurora airport, said he would like to have seen a "hybrid" approach that would have lengthened the runway to make the airport safer for corporate jets and lead to more economic development at the airport.

"I think if you were to extend the runway a little bit to the north, and the rest to the south, there wouldn't be an issue," he said.

The only other master plan approved for the airport — in 1976 — called for a 6,000-foot runway, 1,000 feet more than the runway is today, said Millar.

"When more traffic shows up on Interstate 5 we expand the highway, there is no reason we shouldn't be doing the same thing when we get more traffic at the airport," he said.