

Airport project ready for takeoff

By J.R. Logan

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The new Taos Town Council voted unanimously Tuesday (March 11) to spend almost a half-million dollars to keep a runway expansion project at the Taos Municipal Airport moving forward.

The primary aim of the long-delayed project is to build a crosswind runway to improve landing safety at the airport. But the town has been short on cash to pay its share. It has also faced criticism from many — including recently elected officials — for trying to annex the airport property in order to raise the money through tax revenue.

The bulk of the \$24 million airport project is being funded with a federal grant, but the town is required to provide a local match. Tuesday's vote to approve \$486,000 for the first phase of the project will allow the town to meet a looming deadline.

Town staff said Tuesday the grant application must be submitted and the project must be ready to go by May 1.

The town will likely be on the hook for another half-million-dollar match once the first phase of construction is complete in the next 12 to 18 months. How the town plans to cover that cost remains unclear, since the new majority on the council has said it would like the annexation — the current probable funding source — to be undone.

Tuesday's meeting was the first for Mayor Dan Barrone and council members Fritz Hahn and Judi Cantò, who were all elected in municipal elections last week. All three criticized the annexation and project funding while running for office, and Hahn said Tuesday he felt "sandbagged" by having to decide whether to approve the money at his first meeting as a councilor.

The town match approved Tuesday will come from \$350,000 already set aside by the council for the airport with the remaining \$136,000 coming from surplus tax revenue. The money all comes from the town's capital funds, which are earmarked for infrastructure projects.

Hahn specifically asked town manager Oscar Rodriguez Tuesday if the match money was taking away from basic town projects such as roads and sewer — issues he ran heavily on during the campaign. Rodriguez replied that none of the money was dedicated to other projects.

The town council does have the authority to redirect all capital funds (including the \$486,000 dedicated Tuesday) toward any infrastructure projects it deems worthy.

The previous town council voted unanimously a year ago to annex the airport to capture gross receipts tax revenue generated by the construction project. The town hoped to use that revenue to cover most of its match.

The county filed two lawsuits to stop the annexation. In December, District Court Judge Jeff McElroy ruled against the town, reversing the annexation. Days later, the town hired an outside attorney to file an appeal and agreed to pay her up to \$25,000 to handle the case.

Documents provided to *The Taos News* through a public records request show the town had been billed \$10,500 for legal work related to the case as of Feb. 19.

Court records show no indication the appeal has been dropped, and the town council has yet to discuss the issue.

The council's decision last year to annex came after the town snubbed offers from the county to share match costs. The rhetoric of the new members of the council suggests there could be renewed discussions between the town and county to revisit that offer.

As a Taos County commissioner (a position he still holds), Barrone opposed the annexation, but he noted Tuesday he has always supported the airport project as an important part of economic development.