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My Turn

Airport expansion not expansion politics

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It is time to review the facts about the airport expansion – the expansion not expansion politics.

All airports are subject to something called density altitude. This is especially true at high airports, like Taos. Our surveyed field elevation is about 7,100 feet but on a warm day, aircraft have to perform as if it were at 9,500 feet. On a hot day that altitude can climb to over 10,000 feet.

What this means is an airplane is going to need a longer runway, a lighter load or more power (maybe more power than its capable of producing).

There are days when even the Care Flight helicopter cannot generate enough lift to get safely off the ground and helicopters don't even require a runway.

If you can't generate enough power you can reduce the weight of the plane by carrying fewer passengers, less cargo and less fuel. That equates to lost revenue for the operator of the airplane and for the city.

Or you can lengthen the runway. So, people are asking why shorten a runway that is already too short? The answer is, federal regulations now prohibit the construction of new runways that intersect. The land for the new 8,600-foot runway 12/30 was purchased in 1986 before the restriction on intersecting runways. You can see on Google Earth where the new runway 12/30 has always been planned to go.

It is fenced and mowed. It is like the top bar on a capitol "T". The stem of the "T" is the existing Runway 4/22. Simply put, the existing Runway 4/22 has to be shortened by 420 feet to make room for Runway 12/30 which will be long enough to solve the density altitude issues.

To make matters worse, at Taos, the existing runway has a .08 percent gradient. That is a drop of 45 feet from one end of the runway to the other. When every foot of runway counts even a slight gradient becomes significant. The new runway will have a 0 percent gradient.

Currently, on a hot summer's day, an inexperienced pilot might race down the Taos runway, full of passengers and fuel and instead of taking-off just drive off the end runway into the sagebrush. Uniformed, Taosenos have come to believe that the safety issues being bantered about deal with crosswinds. But the current Runway 4/22 actually lines up nicely with the prevailing winds

about 90 percent of the time. The real safety issue at Taos Regional is the density altitude and therefore runway length.

These same people are concerned that we have no control tower. Most airports in the U.S. operate without a tower. All pilots are familiar with standard airport procedures and follow them. They also have radios to talk to each other.

As to the Osprey issue.

The airport is a publicly owned. This means that anybody can take off and land there. This includes unarmed military aircraft. The Taos airport has jet fuel for sale. Sometimes this is why the Ospreys stop here; they just need gas.

There is no reason for an increase in military air traffic, just because we will have a longer runway. Ospreys don't need runways.

The new Runway 12/30 will also allow BLM firefighting aircraft operate out of Taos rather than operating out of fields with a lower density altitude but are farther away.

People are concerned that the new runway is going to create increased air traffic. This is probably not the case.

People fly to Taos to partake in all that the Taos area has to offer but they don't come to Taos to see a new runway. The Environmental Impact Study predicted an initial 4 percent increase in traffic. There used to be a commercial flight here, but there was not enough business to make the route profitable. A new airline is not going to operate at a loss just because there is a longer runway.

An increase in neighborhood overflights does not have to happen if the standard procedures are: a left hand pattern for Runway 30 and a right hand pattern for Runway 12.

These procedures would have all pattern work done over Taos Pueblo grazing lands.

Runway 30 will have limited straight-in approaches because of the mountains. It will not even have an Instrument Landing System (ILS).

Straight-in approaches to Runway 12 will come in from around Tres Piedras then over Pueblo and private grazing lands in the Stagecoach Neighborhood.

So, the next time you go to an airport meeting your signs should read; "RIGHT HAND TRAFFIC FOR RUNWAY 12."

Stephen Morrisette is a resident of Taos.