

Airport opponents claim project lacks approval

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Opponents of the expansion of Taos Regional Airport contend the project does not have the required zoning approval, and are asking the Taos County Commission to hold public hearings on the issue.

The town expects construction on the first phase of the project to begin this fall, and there is at this point no indication from town or county officials the project will be stalled.

Two Santa Fe attorneys wrote a letter addressed to the Taos County Commission on behalf of their clients — a group opposing the expansion calling itself Taos Land, Water and Culture. The attorneys assert the town is violating the due rights of their clients by not following the county's land use regulations, which the attorneys claim require public hearings to approve such a project.

The town held an "informational forum" on the airport project Monday (Aug. 25). Dozens of members of the public attended the forum and many reiterated concerns that the airport expansion would increase air traffic and noise pollution, invite a greater military presence in the region, and widen the gap between Taos' poor and wealthy classes.

"We are not a radical group," said Andres Vargas, who raised objections to the project. "We are genuinely concerned, patriotic citizens."

The forum can be seen in its entirety at taos22.com. To download the letter on zoning approval, find this story at taosnews.com.

The proposed expansion of the airport is primarily the creation of a second runway that would run perpendicular to the existing runway and be 50 percent longer. Federal officials and local pilots contend that the project won't attract larger aircraft, but will instead make the airport safer. They also say the military has no reason to increase its minimal use of the Taos airport.

The project was stalled for decades because of opposition from Taos Pueblo, which had concerns pilots would intrude on Pueblo airspace. The Pueblo government withdrew those objections in 2012, opening the door to the expansion.

The \$24 million project is being funded almost entirely with a federal grant, though the town is required to come up with a match of about \$1.4 million. The current town council approved \$500,000 to fund the first phase of construction in March. That work could begin as soon as October.

The concerns raised by opponents and their attorneys is the town failed to get the go-ahead from the Taos County Planning Department.

Acting planning director Edward Vigil was at the forum Monday, but he declined to comment on whether the town received the necessary approvals. Vigil referred questions to county attorney Robert Malone, who said he had not reviewed the letter in detail and could not offer a legal opinion.

Town manager Rick Bellis, who was until March deputy county manager and county planning director, said the county's land use regulations provide for an "administrative approval" of the airport expansion. Such approval is given by county staff without input from the public.

The county's land use regulations include a provision to allow for administration approval for "public facilities and infrastructure, including firehouses, schools and utilities." If the town can argue the airport project fits that description, it would only need the blessing of the county planning director instead of a full-blown permit approval process that includes public hearings.

If the county determines the airport project is not eligible for that exemption, it would likely have to go through the county's major development approval process, which requires far more levels of approval as well as public hearings.

Political squabbling between the town and county called into question the airport project timeline last year. The town under former mayor Darren Córdova tried to annex six miles of highway and the airport to capture tax revenue generated by the construction. The town said it needed the annexation to pay for the project. The county filed a lawsuit to stop the annexation and won. In turn, the town appealed that ruling.

The current town council, ushered in on a platform of cooperation in March, quickly dropped the appeal and worked out an agreement with Taos County to share the cost of the airport project.

Councilors Fritz Hahn and Judi Cantò — both elected in March — attended the forum. Cantò declined to give her opinion on the airport project in an interview Wednesday (Aug. 27), though she did say she's concerned about the changes she's seen in other resort communities in the West.

Fritz Hahn said Wednesday (Aug. 27) he is and has always been "50/50" on the project. "I'm not done thinking about it," he said.

Town councilors Andrew Gonzáles and Fred Peralta have expressed unwavering support for the project. Neither attended the forum Monday. Mayor Dan Barrone was also not at the forum.



Katharine Egli

Joaquim Chávez of Taos Aviation Services answers questions at the Airport Forum held at the Town Council Chambers on Monday (Aug. 25).

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