



Town: No negative impact from runway

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The Taos News. 9/19/2014

The town of Taos claims its proposed runway expansion will do nothing to change the character of the area around the airport.

In a letter submitted to county planning officials this week, the town contends the construction of a new, longer runway at the existing facility should have “no negative aesthetic or economic impact at all on the surrounding area.”

Opponents of the project, however, have voiced concerns the direction of the new runway could direct incoming and outgoing air traffic over residential areas. There are also critics who contend the town and county have failed to make important zoning decisions before moving forward with construction, which could begin as early as this fall.

A lawsuit was filed Sept. 8 by six county residents, including author John Nichols, asking a judge to halt the project until the town gets the appropriate approvals from county planners. The town took steps to file its permit application around the time the lawsuit was filed, though officials have denied there is any connection.

While opponents hoped that permit approval process would open the project up to additional public scrutiny, the county has agreed to review the permit application for “administrative approval,” meaning the planning director will decide whether the project is appropriate and compatible with existing land use without requiring public hearings.

The county has solicited written comments from adjacent property owners — a step that is not explicitly required under its regulations.

While the town may avoid additional public hearings on the project, the county’s land use regulations do require that any development “shall be sensitive to and consistent with the existing traditional and historic uses in the neighborhood.” If not, the developer must show the project “would provide a substantial benefit to, or support to, or would not have a substantial impact on the immediate neighborhood.”

Town officials turned in a letter to the county this week arguing the project is compatible with an area the town characterized as industrial.

The letter states: “[The airport] is surrounded by long-standing heavy impact commercial and industrial uses, including the regional landfill, Kit Carson propane storage facility, Waste

Management's regional depot, a sawmill (owned by the mayor), trailer parks, RV park, a brewery, a junk yard and salvage facility, a mobile home salvage operation, machinery shops, auto repair businesses, a solar farm, gravel pits, 10,000 Wags kennel, an NM [Dept. of Transportation] maintenance facility and other heavy uses that generate noise, frequent business-related traffic, heavy equipment traffic and general 'nuisance' activities."

The town argues the airport increases the commercial value of adjacent properties, and contends the expansion would improve safety and reduce the number of accidents in the area. The town also maintains that there will be no increase in size, type or frequency of flights associated with the project.

In fact, the FAA's environmental assessment of the project predicts the number of private flights will increase by about 14 percent if the new runway is built, though the report makes clear the project will do little to make Taos a more viable destination for commercial service.

The town's application contends that the new runway will divert take off and approach patterns over Taos Pueblo Tract A, the unpopulated section of land between the airport and gorge.

A letter dated Sept. 15 and signed by Taos Pueblo Gov. Clyde M. Romero Sr. and War Chief David G. Gomez notes the tribe objected to the expansion for 25 years until it was able to secure various concessions from the FAA, including controls on flights over the historic village and Blue Lake Wilderness. "Taos Pueblo determined not to pursue its opposition to the proposed expansion of the airport because of our success in obtaining agreement to those protective measures," the letter reads. "We are now focused on implementation of this important agreement."

While the tribal government has given the project its OK, two Pueblo residents are named as plaintiffs in the lawsuit.

A copy of the town's compatibility letter, as well as the letter from Taos Pueblo officials, can be found with this story at taosnews.com.

One big question surrounding the airport expansion has been the potential impact to people living in the area. The town's compatibility letter asserts that "there are no residential properties immediately adjacent to the airport or along the immediately adjacent [US 64] corridor."

But opponents of the project have been circulating a map prepared by the project engineer showing possible aircraft take off and landing routes extending into residential areas east of the airport. The map has prompted concerns from property owners that increased flight traffic will hurt their property values, or that they'll be subject to more stringent zoning.

Three neighborhood associations in the area surrounding the airport recently sent a joint letter to Mayor Dan Barrone asking the town to establish routes that would divert air traffic away from residential areas. If done, the associations said they could support the project. Any dramatic change in zoning would need to be first proposed by the associations, then approved by the county commission. At this point, there is no indication that will happen, though some suggest it would be a wise step.

Taos Land, Water and Culture — the same group behind the airport lawsuit — also commissioned Coloradobased Fletcher Aviation Consultants to do a report on land use issues related to the project. The report says local officials have essentially ignored zoning issues

around the airport, including suggestions made by the Federal Aviation Administration, which is providing a grant to cover almost the entire cost of the \$24 million expansion.

“This represents a classic case of the FAA doing what it is required to do, but the city and county not addressing the surrounding land use issues needing to be modified in support the airport and the future uses that can be accepted in the areas immediately surrounding the airport,” the report reads.

“The city and county would be well served to address the adjacent land use zoning issues now instead of waiting for non-compatibility issues [projects that don’t fit to go next to an airport] to create problems in the future,” the report later reads.

Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis has long been a proponent of establishing a joint town/county zoning district in the area around the airport, though the idea has made little headway.

Bellis said last week it would take too long to create such a district without delaying construction on the expansion.

At this point, the only comments the county appears willing to consider will come from property owners in the area adjacent to the proposed runway expansion. County records show the town sent certified letters to dozens of property owners last week.

The letter makes clear that the town’s application can be approved administratively, meaning there is no public hearing necessary. The letter does note that the deadline for written comments is Oct. 15 by 5 p.m. The county had received no comments as of midday Tuesday (Sept. 16).