



# THE TAOS NEWS

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## Town ready to roll on airport, waiting county's OK

By J.R. Logan

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The town of Taos says it's ready to break ground on a major expansion at the regional airport, but it's now waiting on approval from the Taos County Planning Department.

"We don't have a firm timeline until we get the permit from the county," said airport manager John Thompson in an interview Wednesday (Oct. 8). "The federal, state and local money is all in place. The contractor has his notice of award. We're ready."

However, earlier this week, the town gave the county permission to take extra time to make a preliminary decision on the permit application for the project.

Under the county's land use regulations, the planning director must determine if an application for a development permit includes all the necessary documents within 30 days of its submittal. The town filed its original application in early September, and a decision on whether the it was complete was originally due this week.

However, in an Oct. 6 email, Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis said the town is willing to waive the 30-day review requirement because of "the large amount of material" submitted with the application.

On Sept. 9, the town council voted to award a construction contract on the first phase of the project. That 3-2 vote came after weeks of public debate on whether the expansion was warranted.

The \$23 million airport expansion includes the construction of a second runway meant to improve safety at the relatively high-altitude airport. Most of the project is being funded with a federal grant, but the town must come up with a 5 percent match (or about \$1.4 million) to receive funding.

Proponents of the project say modernizing the airport will improve public safety, not only for private pilots but for the entire community. However, critics have offered a variety of arguments against the expansion, ranging from fears that the new runway will increase air traffic, exacerbate Taos' wealth gap, or invite more of a military presence in the area. There have also been concerns that the town has more pressing needs to which it should be investing its money. One group of opponents pointed out that the town had not, until recently, made any attempts to get zoning approval from Taos County. A lawsuit making those kinds of allegations was filed Sept. 8 in district court in Taos, around the same time the town first met with county officials and submitted a permit application. There has been no movement in that case since it was filed.

The county planning department is accepting comments on the expansion, though county officials have said only comments from adjacent landowners will be weighed in making a final determination on the project.

As of Wednesday (Oct. 7) the county had received a handful of comments on the proposed expansion, though it's not clear at this point how many of those comments are from adjacent property owners.