

Fight over airport expansion goes back decades

By J.R. Logan

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The recent controversy surrounding the Taos airport expansion is only the latest in a nearly 30-year debate over whether a second runway is needed and what its environmental and social impacts might be. Below is a quick rundown of how the project got where it is today.

1986 — Town takes first steps toward an Environmental Assessment to evaluate the impacts of a second runway at the Taos Regional Airport.

August 1987 — First public hearing held to unveil the findings of the original assessment.

May 1988 — Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) determines the project will have “no significant impact” and subsequently approves funding for construction.

1990 — Community activists unite to form the “Coalition for an EIS” — a group demanding the federal government to do a more comprehensive environmental study of the proposed project. The group argued, among other things, the Environmental Assessment didn’t adequately take into consideration the Wild and Scenic River designation of the nearby Rio Grande, nor did it truly consider socioeconomic impacts of the new runway.

July 1991 — The U.S. District Court of New Mexico rules in favor of the activists and ordered the FAA to do a full Environmental Impact Statement (EIS).

1992 — FAA starts work on the EIS. The agency hires a consultant and holds two meetings in Taos to collect comments on the project.

August 1993 — FAA finishes its draft EIS but concludes it needs to do additional studies. EIS process is suspended while more data collection is done.

October 1995 — FAA brings Taos Pueblo into the fold as a “cooperating agency.” A few months later, the National Park Service gets involved and offers expertise in evaluating possible impacts because of the Pueblo’s UNESCO World Heritage Site status.

February 1996 — FAA and Taos Pueblo agree to start an ethnographic study. The study of cultural resources is published in May 1998.

April 1998 — The EIS process is reinstated and includes a slew of additional studies, including case studies of expansions at similar airports and coordination with Taos Pueblo to protect cultural properties.

October 2006 — Draft EIS is made public, a informational meeting is held in November, and comments on the document are accepted until January 2007. During this same time, meetings are held that include the town, the tribe, FAA and other parties. Taos Pueblo expresses concerns about possible impacts to cultural properties. FAA considers suggestions to lessen those impacts.

September 2010 — Town hires consultant to begin design work on new runway.

December 2011 — Taos Pueblo signs agreement with town, FAA and other parties, making progress on the project possible.

March 2013 — Saying it doesn't have the cash to cover its 5-percent match for the \$24 million grant, the town annexes the airport to collect tax revenue generated by construction. Taos County government openly opposes the annexation and files a lawsuit to stop the annexation in April.

December 2013 — A Taos judge rules against the town and quashes the annexation. The town takes the case to the court of appeals. The case is dropped four months later and the town and county agree to split the match for the grant.

September 2014 — A split council votes to award the contract to a local contractor a day after a group of six residents file a lawsuit to have the project halted. The lawsuit claims the town and county failed to adopt necessary zoning in the area around the airport.

— *Compiled by J.R. Logan*