

Airport expansion gets the go-ahead

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The expansion of the Taos Airport is cleared for takeoff.

Acting Taos County Planning Director Edward Vigil approved the town's permit application Tuesday (Dec. 23) for the \$24 million project, which will include the construction of a second runway at the facility northwest of town.

To download a copy of the approval, find this story at taosnews.com.

The controversial project has been the source of heated debate in the community in recent months, but the battle over whether the expansion is needed or wanted goes back decades.

Supporters of the expansion say the second runway will improve safety at the airport and encourage investment and economic development in Taos. Nearly all of the cost of the project is being covered by the state and federal governments. The airport is owned and operated by the town of Taos.

Detractors have made various arguments against the expansion, including worries that it will increase pollution, affect property values in the surrounding area, lead to an increased military presence in Taos, and worsen the economic gap between the wealthy and poor.

In his 12-page decision issued Tuesday (Dec. 23), Vigil found the project was "sensitive to and consistent with existing traditional and historic uses in the neighborhood," noting that there has been an airport in the area since the mid-'60s. Vigil also found the project would be "sensitive to and consistent with the architectural design, scale, density, bulk, building height, historical character, and orientation of the existing properties in the neighborhood."

Vigil wrote that the "visual impact" of the expansion would be "minimal and sensitive to existing properties in the neighborhood" since nearly all of the improvements (namely the runway) would be at ground level.

Critics of the expansion have pointed out that the new runway will likely alter aircraft approach routes and will increase air traffic over residential areas surrounding the airport. Neighborhood associations in the area have asked the airport manager to implement specific routes that would lessen these effects.

It's almost certain that opponents of the airport will appeal Vigil's ruling. If so, the county planning and zoning commission will be asked to make a decision. The next step would be to take the permit to the county commissioners themselves.

However, Vigil's approval means the town can technically break ground on the project now. When reached Tuesday, Taos Town Manager Rick Bellis was unsure when construction would begin.

The fact that the hotly debated permit came down to the decision of one man has to do with an exemption in the county's land use regulations.

Under those regulations, a private person or company wishing to do a project of that size would have to go through a lengthy major development permit process that includes public hearings.

However, the regulations only require that a "public facility" get the scrutiny of the planning director before being approved.

Vigil's decision to approve the permit comes while a group of Taos residents is suing to halt the project until airport-appropriate zoning is adopted in the areas around the facility.

The Federal Aviation Administration recommends zoning that limits building height and types of use in areas around airports but a spokesperson for the agency has said such regulation is not a requirement for funding.

A decision in that case has not yet been made. A hearing has been set for Jan. 8.