

## **Judge hears arguments in airport lawsuit**

**By Andrew Oxford**

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The lawyer representing local residents opposed to an expansion of Taos Regional Airport called Thursday (Jan. 8) for a judge to suspend the project and direct county leaders to re-zone the area.

The call for an injunction follows the decision last month by Taos County's acting planning director to grant a permit for construction of a second runway at the airport.

The planning process called for by lawyer Christopher Graeser would allow input from local residents on whether the area should be zoned to allow for such a permit, he argued.

Without a thorough zoning process, Graeser suggested the county avoids public input.

During the two-hour hearing before Eighth Judicial District Court Judge Jeff McElroy, however, an attorney representing the county argued an order halting the project would be premature.

The typical permit process has not run its course, lawyer Bob Malone said. The Taos County Planning and Zoning Commission and the Board of Commissioners have yet to decide on the permit, he noted, adding both bodies could hear public comment on the matter.

McElroy seemed uncomfortable intervening in the county's permitting process before its conclusion, likening himself to Desi Arnaz in the popular 1950's sitcom "I Love Lucy" by suggesting Graeser "had some 'splaining to do."

"What you want is no runway but that's not how you're couching it in legal terms," the judge said.

The lawsuit seems designed to stop the airport expansion project altogether, even if that is not its stated aim, McElroy said.

The zoning process would be more consultative and inclusive of those residing around the airport, Graeser argued.

But plans to expand Taos Regional Airport, which is owned by the town of Taos, are not new.

Construction of a second runway has been debated and studied for three decades.

The project currently under consideration would include the construction of an 8,600-foot by 100-foot crosswind runway, the shortening of an existing runway by 420 feet, the construction of a

new airport access road approximately 3,200 feet long and the extension of another airport access road by approximately 2,800 feet.

Most of the \$24 million project is being funded with a federal grant. The town government provided a match of approximately \$1.4 million to secure funding.

Supporters of the project say the new runway will improve safety at the airport while expanding accessibility to the Taos area.

Detractors have raised a series of issues in arguing against the expansion, including concerns about pollution, potential military activity and the impact of more air traffic on local property values. In the eyes of some critics, the project has also come to symbolize the divide between rich and poor in Northern New Mexico.

The judge did not issue a ruling Thursday on the motion for an injunction and offered no timeline for a decision.

The suit was filed in September by a group of six Taos-area residents, including noted writer John Nichols. The suit called on county officials to halt the project until a comprehensive zoning process is completed.

Meanwhile, the town government is preparing to break ground.

Officials are completing paperwork and pre-staging crews as well as equipment, town manager Rick Bellis said in an email Friday (Dec. 9).

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