

Taos County P&Z approves airport expansion permit

By J.R. Logan

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The Taos County Planning and Zoning Commission has unanimously upheld the approval of a permit for the expansion of the Taos Regional Airport. The decision came at a meeting March 11.

The airport project has been nearly three decades in the making, but opposition from local residents has repeatedly stalled work. The expansion consists primarily in the construction of a second, longer runway. Preliminary work at the site is already underway.

The airport is operated by the town of Taos, and nearly all of the \$24-million project is being funded by the Federal Aviation Administration.

The acting Taos County Planning Director approved a construction permit for the project in late December. That decision was appealed by a group of Taos County residents, prompting the hearing before the planning and zoning commission.

Proponents of the project argue it will improve safety and better position the region for economic development. Opponents contend the project will only benefit the wealthy and will increase pollution from increased air traffic.

The appeal heard by the planning commission was largely based on the contention that there is not adequate zoning around the airport.

Chris Graeser, a Santa Fe attorney representing those opposing the expansion, argued the planning commission had a responsibility to consider the impacts to people living in the vicinity of the new runway. "The lack of any land-use planning is really indefensible," said Graeser.

But town attorney Floyd Lopez countered the area is already home to the airport and the expansion would do little to change the character of the neighborhood. "If anybody is going to buy land next to an airport, there's going to be planes flying there," Lopez said. "That's what airports do."

While the planning commission did not discuss the matter in public session (state law allows for such issues to be discussed by the board in private) they apparently agreed with Lopez.

All five members of the board voted to uphold the planning director's December ruling.