



Decision on airport permit appealed

By J.R. Logan

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Opponents of the Taos Regional Airport expansion have once again appealed the approval of a permit allowing the project to move forward.

John Nichols, Dilia Martinez, Phillip Reyna, Ernest Concha, Daniel Romero, Bonnie Korman, Edward Sylvester, Jennifer Sylvester and Judy Sutton filed an appeal April 30 contesting a decision by the Taos County Planning Commission.

In March, the planning commission unanimously upheld the approval of a construction permit allowing the town of Taos to build a second runway at the airport.

The \$24 million project has been in the works for decades and is being funded almost entirely by the Federal Aviation Administration. The town owns and operates the facility.

Supporters of the project argue it will modernize Taos' airport, make it safer and better position the region for economic development. Opponents are concerned it will lead to additional pollution, benefit only Taos' most wealthy residents and visitors and possibly open the door to increased military presence in the area.

Construction on the project began this spring and is currently underway.

The group that filed the most recent appeal has already filed a lawsuit in district court asking a judge to halt the project. Late last year, Judge Jeff McElroy denied that request, and suggested the plaintiffs go through the county's entire appeal process before fighting the expansion in court.

The appeal filed last month means the airport construction permit will next be heard by the Taos County Commission. A special meeting to consider the appeal has been scheduled for June 9 at 9 a.m. in the county commission chambers on Albright Street.

In the appeal, an attorney for the appellant reiterated several points it made in court and in its previous appeal, including the assertion the county improperly allowed an expedited approval of the permit, ignored zoning recommendation provided by the project's engineers, and did not adequately protect nearby residents from possible increased nuisance and safety hazards.

So far, the town and county attorneys have been able to fight off those claims, and convince both a judge and the planning commission the approval of the permit was appropriate.

On June 9, the project opponents will once again make their case. Whichever way the county commission rules, its decision will likely be appealed to district court. Meanwhile, work on the new runway remains unimpeded.