

Airport hearing raises \$10 million question

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A \$10 million loss.

That “guesstimate” in reduced property values stemming from the construction of a second runway at the airport was enough to halt a day-long hearing on the airport expansion in its tracks.

The Taos County Commission heard more than eight hours of testimony Tuesday (June 9) on whether it should uphold the approval of a permit for the construction of a second runway at the airport. Much of that time was spent rehashing and debating whether the airport would be a boon for or a bane on the community.

But it was an off-the-cuff remark from deputy county assessor Randy Baca that got the attention of at least one county commissioner.

The discussion was prompted by a request from the commission for a map showing residences in the area surrounding the airport. The county’s planning department provided a map that showed, according to its records, about 650 homes in the Lower Las Colonias area south of US 64.

Based on that map, Baca offered a hypothetical case in which every one of those 650 properties would see values decrease by \$15,000. In total, such a scenario would add up to \$10 million in lost values.

By the end of the meeting, it appeared commissioner Jim Fambro couldn’t get that figure out of his head.

Fambro told the crowd Baca’s statement “rocked the room,” and Fambro said he would not vote on whether to approve the permit.

Rather than voting on the permit Tuesday, the commission decided to postpone a decision until more information could be gathered on what, if any, effect the new runway would have on nearby property values. Commissioners also asked for details on whether the airport plans to serve scheduled commercial flights, and whether it can enforce a weight limit to control the kinds of planes that use the runway. The commission also said they’d like to do a site visit to look at the location of the new runway at a future meeting.

The commission voted 3-2 to continue the meeting until July 14, at which time they would review supplemental information and visit the runway site where work has already commenced.

Commissioners Fambro, Gabe Romero and Candyce O'Donnell voted to continue the meeting. Tom Blankenhorn and Mark Gallegos opposed the motion.

A study on possible property value impacts will likely be challenging to come up with. Baca said he would try to find other communities in the state that have seen airport expansions and use those as case studies to analyze values of surrounding properties. The true effect, however, is impossible to predict.

Baca said the impact won't be known until the runway is finished and there are actual sales in the area that can be used for comparison.

He told the commission toward the end of its meeting that the \$10 million loss was a "guesstimate" and he was "not sure whether it is going to be a gain or a loss [in value]."

Commissioner Blankenhorn appeared skeptical of any study attempting to pin down a future valuation decrease to a specific amount.

"I just don't know how Randy's going to come up with that," Blankenhorn said. "It's such a speculative number."

Opponents of the airport expansion have long been making the argument that the second runway would decrease residential property values, but it finally seemed to gain traction Tuesday.

In a recent court case on the airport, Chris Graeser, the Santa Fe attorney representing the group of airport critics, asserted the new runway would "diminish" property values, but didn't quantify what that decrease might be.

The attorney included a 2001 article entitled "The Impact of Airport Noise on Residential Real Estate" from a publication called *The Appraisal Journal*.

That article cited research that found properties very close to busy airports (far busier than Taos) lose between 7 to 12 percent of their value.

"The impact of noise from a national or international airport on residential properties is universally negative on residential property market values under or near a heavy flight corridor," the article states.

But the article was quick to point out there is no standard criterion by which to define what constitutes a "noisy" airport. And it concluded the impact to property values varies depending on the loudness and frequency of aircraft flights.

"The fact that a property is situated near a noise source is not automatic evidence of a loss in market value."

The article points out some homebuyers aren't bothered by noise and are happy to buy near an airport to get a cheaper price. Other people can't stand noise and would never buy near an airport, regardless of the discount.

The article also noted people on both sides of an airport debate tend to cherry-pick study results to suit their argument.

“...Those with special political agendas, such as pro- or anti-airport groups, often selectively cite study results such as these. A proper and unbiased study should consider the net effects of these issues on balance.”

Arguments over noise and other issues followed a request from the appellants’ attorney who asked commissioners Fambro and Blankenhorn to recuse themselves from the proceedings because of comments they previously made in support of the airport expansion.

Graeser read comments Blankenhorn made at a public meeting in February 2013, as well as in an op-ed published in

The Taos News March 14, 2014. In both cases, Blankenhorn said he wanted the expansion to go forward.

“The airport expansion is an important, long-term investment in our community that will improve the accessibility and safety of air travel into and out of Taos,” Blankenhorn wrote in the op-ed piece.

Graeser also suggested comments from Fambro indicated he had made up his mind.

Graeser pointed to a transcript from a candidate forum in April 2014 held while Fambro was running for commission.

According to the transcript, Fambro said he was behind the project for public safety reasons.

“You know, I’ve been part of the different hearings that are going on, and there’s a lot of negativity out there regarding the airport,” the transcript reads. “The number one driving force for me in supporting that project is the safety aspect that we have because of that.”

At Tuesday’s meeting, Graeser maintained these comments — all stating that the project benefited the community and should happen — would bias them when deciding whether to approve or deny a permit that allows construction of the second runway to take place.

Blankenhorn responded his comments were in the context of a controversial annexation. Fambro said his statements reflected his firmly held opinion public safety is a top priority.

Both insisted they would fairly weigh evidence presented by both sides, and their decision on whether to approve the permit was not predetermined.

The county’s land use regulations state a commissioner shall not participate in or vote on such a matter if that board member has “prejudged or fixed his or her opinion on a matter prior to hearing the evidence and argument of all parties at the public hearing.”

The county attorney gave all of the commissioners his legal opinion on the issue, but behind closed doors (state law gives the commission the ability to meet in private in these circumstances). When they emerged, commissioner O’Donnell made motions asking Blankenhorn, then Fambro to recuse themselves from the proceedings.

But the motions got no support from anyone else on the five-member board, and both motions died.

If the county commission eventually votes to uphold the permit and allow the project to move forward, it's likely the decision would be appealed in the courts. The appeal could be based, at least in part, on the basis that certain commissioners were not impartial.