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Commission OKs expansion in ongoing airport debate

By J.R. Logan

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The expansion of the Taos Regional Airport has survived yet another challenge.

The Taos County Commission voted 3-1 Tuesday (July 14) to uphold the approval of a construction permit for the project, which consists primarily in the addition of a second runway. The vote means construction on the project will be allowed to continue.

Commissioner Gabe Romero was the lone dissenting vote.

The vote on the project's fate followed almost 10 hours of arguments and testimony, as well as a field trip to the site where dirt work began months ago.

If opponents of the project want to make another appeal, they would have to take their case to district court.

The day-long proceedings started with an obscenities laden outburst from a few audience members that followed Commissioner Candyce O'Donnell's decision to voluntarily recuse herself from the proceedings. O'Donnell was accused of violating county regulations (meant to ensure a fair and unbiased hearing) when she independently sought out information on airport zoning issues. O'Donnell said afterward she did not intentionally violate the rules.

"No, Candyce, you can't do this to us," shouted one member of the public as O'Donnell packed her things and made her way from the room.

"The process is corrupt," said another.

The hearing was only the latest in a long series of public debates on the merits of the \$24-million project, which is being funded almost entirely by the federal government.

Opponents argue the expansion will pose a danger to surrounding property owners, exacerbate the wealth gap in Taos County and contribute to pollution in the region. Supporters argue the new runway will improve safety at the facility and better position the region for economic development.

The airport is owned by the town of Taos, but it needs approval from the county government to proceed with the project.

The acting county planning director first gave his approval of a permit for the project last December. Opponents of the project appealed that decision to the county planning and zoning commission, which upheld the director's approval in March. Opponents again appealed that decision, prompting the most recent hearing before the county commission.

The idea for building a second runway was first floated 30 years ago, but for decades, critics of the project have been highly skeptical and suspicious of any rationale offered by governmental officials.

Most of the opponents who spoke against the project Tuesday contended it would benefit the wealthy and an "elite jet class" at the expense of Taos' working poor.

"There are significant, long-term impacts on the immediate neighborhood without any corresponding long-term benefits for the neighborhood," said Christopher Graeser, a Santa Fe attorney representing a group opposed to the new runway.

Graeser argued residents in the immediate area around the airport would have to contend with additional noise and the threat of crashing aircraft, and he maintained the county must do better land-use planning in the area to protect residents and their properties.

"By and large, that's not a well-off community," Graeser said, alluding to the houses in the vicinity of the airport. "These are the people government needs to protect."

However, town attorney Floyd Lopez insisted the impacts to nearby residents would be minimal and the benefits to pilots would be substantial.

At one point, Lopez stood at the podium with his arms stretched out to his sides like airplane wings, trying to demonstrate how aircraft must "crab" in sideways as it approaches the existing runway in a stiff crosswind.

The new runway is meant to make it easier to land in adverse weather conditions, though a federal study notes the existing facility is adequate more than 90 percent of the time.

In his closing arguments, Lopez expressed utter confusion when describing the attitude of many airport opponents. "It seems to me that many don't seem to care to understand the facts," Lopez said, eliciting a groan from the mostly anti-runway crowd. "They're just against it."

Tuesday's hearing picked up where the meeting left off last month. Commissioners spent all of June 9 listening to arguments and public testimony on the project, but the comment that seemed to stop the process in its tracks was a statement by deputy county assessor Randy Baca that property values around the airport might drop by \$10 million if the new runway is built.

That statement clearly worried some commissioners, who asked that some research be done to pin down what effect there might be to nearby property values.

This week, Baca essentially walked backed the \$10 million bombshell, noting the recent expansion of an airport terminal in Santa Fe did not seem to have any direct impact on nearby property values there. Baca said it would be impossible to know what effect, if any, there would be, until the project is finished and properties are bought and sold.

Romero, the lone “no” vote on the commission, said in an interview Wednesday (July 15) he voted against the approving the permit because the community appeared opposed to the project. “Even though it’s been 30 years or so, I kind of feel like we’re ramming it down the throat of a neighborhood that doesn’t want it,” Romero said.

Had she not recused herself from the proceedings, there was a perception among critics of the project that O’Donnell would have voted against the permit as well. (O’Donnell insists she told no one how she would have voted.) O’Donnell’s recusal wasn’t the first time the issue has come up.

Under the appeal process, county commissioners must act as impartial “judges.” In this case, they’re being asked to decide whether to uphold the permit strictly based on evidence introduced in a formal hearing process.

At the June 9 meeting, commissioners Tom Blankenhorn and Jim Fambro were asked to step down because of comments they had made and letters they’d previously written suggesting they support the airport project. Both insisted they had no preconceived judgement on the airport and could rule fairly.

At that meeting, O’Donnell made motions for both Blankenhorn and Fambro to step down. But those motions were not supported by anyone else on the five-member panel.

Romero said Wednesday he regretted not supporting O’Donnell’s motion to force a vote on recusing Fambro and Blankenhorn.

Despite the repeated appeals and the possibility that the construction permit would be revoked, the town of Taos began construction of the second runway after the permit was originally approved last December. Work at the facility continues.