

## Prepare for landing

### **Airport project looks to June completion**

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Michael Garcia put an expected June completion date for Taos' airport this way: "We're there. We can finally see the light."

Garcia – of Armstrong Consultants – is managing the construction of a new 8,700-foot-long runway at Taos Regional Airport. He spoke at a Jan. 19 board meeting about the progress of the project at Taos Town Hall.

The \$24 million expansion has been met with some public criticism since its inception in 2015, culminating in a failed appeal to the Taos County Commission to deny its approval this past July.

Opponents of the project have argued that added air traffic will increase pollution and benefit only those wealthy enough to fly privately. Its proponents maintain the benefits of a new runway will be far-reaching, ensuring safer takeoffs and landings for private flights and easier access for emergency air vehicles, such as those used to fight area wildfires.

Though the project has been progressing for several months, the collective relief at its approval remains palpable among its advocates, as is their excitement as they eyeball a serious end date.

In the lead-up to the deadline, Armstrong Consulting has been working with Northern Mountain Constructors – an El Prado-based company – on meeting a strict list of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) guidelines.

"We're at the stage of the project where we're meeting all of the specifications for materials, signage and the temperature requirements for the runway," Garcia said. "We're at the mercy of the temperatures. But if we work through April and May, we're anticipating a summer completion."

One important milestone was recently reached when FAA jets flew the approaches to the runway – an initial assessment of flight paths and proper runway signage. The new runway is classified as "C2," more than 1.5 miles long and 100 feet wide.

"It's tight," John Thompson, airport manager and board secretary, said. "If you think about a jet that's touching down at 112 miles an hour and it's waving, you know what that does in your car, right? It just can't be."

Garcia responded, "For the rebalancing work, we're looking at the top lift of the pavement. Then we're also looking at painting – marking the runway and taxiways. There is more work to be done on the airport's electrical system and flight check." Once the requirements have been met, FAA representatives will again fly out to verify that specifications have been satisfied.

Meanwhile, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) has also been signed by Taos Pueblo, the town of Taos and the FAA to limit air traffic over tribal lands.

“There has been a lot of cooperation,” said Taos Pueblo representative Clyde Romero Jr. “The Pueblo is satisfied that this will be a good project.”

Taos Pueblo is also drafting congressional legislation to permanently restrict flights over the Pueblo.

“We’ll be working with the town to get ready for the grand opening,” Garcia said. “It’s going to be quite special, and I think it should be. A lot of people are excited to see this come to culmination and finish up. It’s going to be quite an event.”

Before that happens, board members said they are also looking at inviting the public to come out and walk the runway in coming months.

The next board meeting is scheduled for March 16.



**Workers make final improvements to the new 8,700-foot-long runway at Taos Regional Airport. Before the project is completed, a strict set of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) specifications must be met.**

**Courtesy town of Taos**

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