

New Mexico Court of Appeals to review approval of airport expansion

By John Miller

The Taos News, 2/11/2017

More than one year after an appeal to halt plans to expand the Taos Regional Airport failed in Taos District Court, a decision by the New Mexico Court of Appeals to review the case may offer renewed hope to opponents of the project.

The acceptance of the petition for "writ of certiorari" – a request that a higher court review a ruling by a lower court – comes less than one month after project stakeholders and board members met at Taos Town Hall to discuss the \$24-million project's completion, tentatively scheduled for June of this year.

The expansion includes the construction of an additional runway intended to provide safer landings at a regional airfield that has gained some notoriety for particularly rocky landings on blustery afternoons on the Taos mesa. Proponents of the project also say that emergency air vehicles, such as helicopters used to fight wildfires, will benefit from an additional 1.5 miles of landing strip.

Appellants challenged Taos County's approval of the project in September 2015, arguing that the county had bungled the project's application process by approving it under looser requirements typically reserved for "public utility projects." Opponents also contended that county commissioners Tom Blankenhorn and Jim Fambro were "biased" because they had both previously made public statements in favor of the project prior to the hearing that would determine its approval. Appellants pointed to county land use regulations and the county commission's duty to act as "an objective arbiter" as the basis for its arguments, respectively.

On Oct. 12, 2015, Judge Jeff McElroy of Taos District Court **rejected the appeal** and the project began around the spring of last year.

The petition for writ of certiorari and responses of the nine appellants were filed in December and approved Feb. 1.



Two 627F Wheel Tractor-Scraper Trucks drive through Taos Regional Airport's new runway construction site in March 2015.
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