

New airport runway opens, diverts air traffic away from Taos Pueblo

By **Jesse Moya**, *jmoya@taosnews.com*

The Taos News, 8/31/2017

Federal, state and local officials gathered Friday (Aug. 25) at Taos Regional Airport to celebrate the official opening of a long-anticipated new runway.

The 8,600-foot runway – about 1.6 miles long – will aid emergency services and other pilots with an additional, longer runway for the airport and will also divert air traffic away from Taos Pueblo and the lands surrounding it, according to officials. Local officials said the project has been 30 years in the making and they are excited to be a part of the construction and completion of the more than \$24 million project.

“This is an amazing opportunity for our community,” said Taos County Manager Leandro Cordova during the official opening of the runway.

Cordova, along with several other local and state officials, said the project was done collectively with several different governing entities, including Taos Pueblo and the town of Taos, and could not have been a reality without their collaboration.

Taos Pueblo initially opposed the new runway, concerned it would increase air traffic over Pueblo lands and sacred sites. The Pueblo eventually signed an agreement with the town to keep planes from flying over certain areas.

And while the town owns the regional airport, Taos County had to approve the permit to build the expanded runway.

Six county residents appealed the county commission’s approval of the new runway in 2015, saying some of the commissioners were biased regarding the project. A district court upheld the county’s decision, but the New Mexico Court of Appeals agreed to hear the case earlier this year. A decision is pending.

Running roughly in a northwest- southeast direction, the new runway will not only divert air traffic away from the Pueblo, but will also make for a safer landing and takeoff for pilots using the tarmac given its position, as well as the length.

“Obviously, the old runway is a shorter distance,” said town of Taos Public Works Director Francisco Espinoza. “The predominant wind was on a northsouth access, and if the plane was trying to land fighting that crosswind, it becomes very dangerous for the pilots.”

According to Espinoza, the new runway gives pilots the ability to take off and land with the wind rather than across it. In addition, the flights coming in and out of the airport will change directions from the previous flight path, but Espinoza said it shouldn’t be more of an issue than before for neighborhoods and houses. While officials have noted that one subdivision will be in the path of the planes, the difference in air traffic should not be too much more than was in the area before the opening of the runway.

As a “cautiously optimistic” supporter of the new runway, Taos Mesa Brewing co-founder Dan Irion said he hopes the new runway brings in economic development, but also hopes the management has the right direction for the future.

“I have no idea what to expect from this. From a business standpoint, the perception is that this is a great opportunity,” Irion said. “If it just gets used as the purview of the wealthy elite, I don’t see how that would be much – if any – of a boom to the business community in Taos.”

As a neighbor to the airport, the Taos Mesa Brewing Mothership location was used for parking for the ribbon-cutting event. Irion said he wants to see the new airport succeed in bringing in more development and business opportunities to Taos. Not necessarily an opponent to the new runway, Irion said the project is done and is ready to get behind it to hopefully see the long-awaited addition thrive for the town.

While Taos Pueblo members and officials were honored by speakers at the ceremonies, the ribbon-cutting took place during traditional ceremonies at the Pueblo and Pueblo officials could not be present for the event. Taos Mayor Dan Barrone said during the ceremony that he was interested in holding an additional opening event so that officials from Taos Pueblo could be honored for their contributions to the new runway.

Flights at Taos Regional Airport are noncommercial flights and the airport cannot currently support planes that weigh more than 60,000 pounds. The majority of flights at the airport are small private propeller planes, as well as small private jets. The airport is open 24 hours for air traffic and parallels Tract A of Taos Pueblo land, which is currently vacant and has no residents or buildings.

Town officials have expressed there may be future expansions to the airport. Such expansion plans are noted in the town’s “Infrastructure Capital Improvement Plan.” A master plan of the airport will eventually be drawn up, looking at the current facility, as well as the possible future plans.