

Airport zoning upsets growers

Residents worry farmland would be sacrificed for expansion

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The Aurora Airport is adjacent to the site of a controversial zone change application.

AURORA, Ore. - A group of north Willamette Valley residents is up in arms over a plan to expand the Aurora Airport into adjacent farmland, saying the expansion poses a risk to much more than the 27.5 acres up for a zone change.

"It's like this row of dominos," Friends of French Prairie President Ben Williams said. "If this (parcel) goes, what is to stop the rest of them from going? This brings development right to the city boundary of Aurora."

The plan before a Marion County hearings officer would change the zone on 27.5 acres just south of the airport from exclusive farm use to public. The hearings officer recently granted the applicants a 90-day extension to present their case.

Marion County Planner Sterling Anderson said it probably is inevitable that at some point the land in question will be rezoned for airport expansion.

To date, however, Anderson said county planners don't believe the applicants have met the requirements for a zone change. County staff has recommended the county deny the request.

Among the criteria planners consider in zone change applications are whether the proposed new use is needed, and whether the makeup of land around the subject parcel commits it to a non-farm use.

The parcel is bordered on two sides by the airport. That proximity, Anderson said, does not commit it to a non-farm use.

French Prairie, a region of high-value farmland south of Wilsonville and north of Woodburn, has been eyed by developers for years. It is flat, close to Interstate 5, close to Portland and much of it borders on Portland's urban growth boundary.

Friends of French Prairie, a citizen group formed to protect the agricultural activity of the area, keeps constant watch on zone change applications and other activity that could erode the agricultural character of the area. The 380-member group was formed shortly after a 2004 Metro Council study identified the area as one of the prime undeveloped industrial sites within 150 miles of the Portland Airport.

Among ideas developers have floated in recent years include constructing a casino and building a warehouse on land just north of Aurora Airport.

The airport expansion plan surfaced Dec. 4 of last year when landowners Ralph Netter and Quinn Collett filed for the zone change.

According to attorney Wally Lien of Salem, airport stakeholders approached his client, Netter - who owns the bulk of the 27.5 acres - with the idea of obtaining the zone change.

The airport, Lien said, is at capacity and airport users would like more hangar sites.

Netter did not return a phone call from the Capital Press.

The zone change request comes on top of a recent proposal from Marion County to use Connect Oregon II funds to construct a control tower at the airport. That proposal has since been dropped, reportedly because the county was unable to secure matching funds for the tower.

Another set of plans for a tower still exist and could become part of an airport master plan that Oregon Department of Aviation officials will develop over the next year or so.

Williams and others fear the construction of a control tower will increase traffic and put added pressure on the airport to expand into adjacent farmland.

Larry Weber, state airports' manager for the Oregon Department of Aviation, said, however, after researching several incidents where a control tower was added to an airport, he has been unable to find a correlation between the presence of a control tower and increased traffic.

Williams, however, believes a control tower will open the airport to use by larger corporate jets.

Adding to Williams' concerns, the airport in recent years has undergone extensive improvements, including a runway rehabilitation project in 2005 and adding lighting on taxi ways.

Those projects, Weber points out, were included in the airport's current master plan, which was developed in 2000. No expansion plans are present in the airport's current 20-year master plan, Weber said.

But that could change when officials adopt a new plan in 2009.

Greg Leo, a lobbyist for the city of Wilsonville, believes expansion plans are part of the current thinking.

"Someplace behind the scenes, someone has a bigger vision for that airport and the surrounding land," Leo said, "but they're not coming forward.

"This is how farmland goes in Oregon," he said. "There are a hundred small decisions and all of a sudden, one day people wake up and you're losing farmland.

"There are two or three small decisions being made here that will affect whether this will be prime farmland in the future or an industrial airport," he said.

Weber countered by saying that airport master plans are developed in full view of the public and that citizens will have multiple opportunities to comment on the next master plan when officials develop it in 2009.

How much influence Friends of French Prairie have over the process and what exactly is proposed, remains to be seen.

The zone change request, meanwhile, probably is still four to five months from being decided, Anderson said.

With appeals, it could be even longer before a final decision is rendered.

One thing is clear, however, Williams said: Development pressure continues to hound French Prairie.