

# Daily Journal of Commerce - Oregon

## Control tower funding takes off before planning

POSTED: Monday, August 23, 2010 at 05:30 PM PT

BY: [Nick Bjork](#)



*Ted Millar, member of the advisory committee leading the Aurora State Airport master plan efforts and owner of Southend Airpark at the airport, stands in front of one of his planes at a hangar on the airport. The state-run airport recently received a \$2.7 million lottery-backed grant to build a control tower at the airport, Oregon's third busiest. (Photo by Dan Carter/DJC)*

A lottery-backed project to improve safety at a small airport in Aurora would seemingly fly under the radar, but it's drawing fire from critics instead.

The Oregon Department of Aviation earlier this year was allotted \$2.7 million of state money for construction of an air traffic control tower at the Aurora State Airport near Wilsonville. Most people agree that Oregon's third busiest airport needs the tower, but officials with surrounding municipalities and land-use advocates are taking issue with what they say is a lack of planning for the project.

They say such neglected foresight could cost taxpayers millions of dollars in the future.

"Our objection is that the funding cart is being placed ahead of the master planning horse," said **Mia Nelson**, Willamette Valley representative of land-use advocacy group **1000 Friends of Oregon**.

An update of the airport's master plan was due this year, but a lack of money has delayed it until 2011, according to **Ted Millar**, a member of the airport master plan advisory committee.

In the meantime, the airport submitted a proposal for the tower project to qualify for a share of \$100 million of ConnectOregon money being made available to non-highway transportation projects, Millar said.

Officials with Clackamas County and the city of Wilsonville understand that it was important for the airport to secure available money for the tower project. But they also say the project's potential impacts are too great for it to move forward without proper planning.

"Simply stated, the aviation department's application for funding of the control tower is premature," said Mark Ottenad, government affairs director for the city of Wilsonville. "That is, steps and processes that should have taken place prior to the application for funding ... have not occurred."

A master-plan update won't necessarily be enough, he said. Wilsonville and Clackamas County, which both border the airport, say they should be involved in the planning process. An intergovernmental agreement includes the state aviation board, the city of Aurora and Marion County. But despite numerous attempts to be included, Clackamas County and Wilsonville have been left out of the discussion, Ottenad said.

The airport is located within Marion County and Aurora; however, both Clackamas County and Wilsonville are within the airport's impact zone, a Federal Aviation Administration sanctioned 1,400-foot radius on the edge of the runway.

"The map clearly leaves out Clackamas County, even though it falls into the impact zone," Nelson said. "They're saying the impact ends at the county line, and that is just not true."

Wilsonville also is concerned about the proposed tower leading to increased road congestion. The airport is expected to be able to handle more commercial flights if the tower were built, and passengers on those flights could contribute to congestion that already exists on Interstate 5, the closest major roadway.

"ODOT (Oregon Department of Transportation) has already noted that Boone Bridge on Interstate 5 is currently at capacity," Ottenad said. "That bridge already has as much traffic as the Columbia River Crossing, and carries 33 percent more freight.

"It cannot handle the traffic that would come from the increased use of the Aurora airport."

According to a recent ODOT study, the cost to widen I-5 south of the Willamette River would be more than \$500 million, Ottenad said.

Millar believes the control tower is paramount to the airport's future. He also said that opponents' concerns are overblown.

"They think it will bring a lot more growth, but it really won't," Millar said. "Having the tower will redirect smaller planes to other small airports, while bigger airplanes, like corporate jets, will use the Aurora Airport."

The airport is home to 475 planes, mostly small ones owned by recreational, noncommercial pilots, he said.

The increase of corporate jets also will significantly decrease the amount of neighborhood noise, he said.

"A private pilot will circle the runway 10 times just to practice, whereas corporate jets just land and take off," he said. "The tower will really help with noise complaints."

Ottenad, however, questioned the motives of the Oregon Department of Aviation and Marion County.

"The department of aviation derives revenues from the fuel, and they are planning on implementing new takeoff and landing fees at the airport," he said. "Getting this tower will make them more money.

"Marion County could also derive increased property tax revenues from changing the land use surrounding the airport from exclusive farm use to industrial. Once this tower is in place, the airport will be able to accommodate more businesses, rather than the recreational pilots that use the airport now."

But Marion County has a different perspective.

"This is all about safety," said Patti Milne, a Marion County commissioner. "There are only a couple of developable private lots around the airport, anyways.

"It's inflating reality to think this tower is going to turn the airport into 'PDX II.' "

Ottenad added that the Oregon Department of Aviation accepted the state money despite not having an estimate of what the control tower will cost.

"This process is an example of how poor planning can affect more than just a single area," he said. "This control tower is going to urbanize this airport, and the costs for surrounding infrastructure associated with urbanizing it are not being taken into account."

ConnectOregon III funding is slated to be officially approved by the Oregon Transportation Commission on Wednesday. The Oregon Department of Aviation will then know exactly how much money it has available for the project. Construction of the tower is expected to start next year.

The Oregon Department of Aviation failed to return multiple phone calls by deadline.