

# Wilsonville candidates fight over Aurora airport — and Oregon's land use laws

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For drivers speeding by on Interstate 5, the Aurora Airport just south of Wilsonville may seem like just another sleepy airstrip.

But it's actually one of Oregon's busiest non-commercial airports, home to a welter of aviation-related companies, with 1,200 jobs and 100,000 takeoffs and landings a year. Two of the most important are the Life Flight Network and Columbia Helicopters, one of the nation's premier heavy-lift helicopter operations.

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Now a long-running dispute over the airport's future has become a big issue in this fall's elections in Wilsonville, with rival factions seeking control of the city council.

The current council majority supports legal action before the state Land Use Board of Appeals that threatens to tie up a planned runway extension.

Critics fear that expansion could bring more industrial development outside the Portland area's urban growth boundary. Business interests connected to the airport are financially backing three candidates they hope would drop the city's participation in the land-use case.

Potentially at stake is the future of a key stretch of the Willamette Valley that has long been on the front lines of the war over how and when to limit urban sprawl in Oregon.

Even though the airport sits outside the city – and even across Clackamas County line into Marion County – Wilsonville has aggressively sought to hold the line on development to its south. That includes keeping a close eye on the airport's growth.

"If not for the city of Wilsonville, the airport would have done a lot more in terms of development, and I'm quite certain would go pell-mell ahead," said Councilor Charlotte Lehan, a former mayor who has long sought to preserve as much farmland as possible and to check sprawl.

The airport is owned by the state, and its planned runway extension – from 5,000 to 6,000 feet – was included in a [2012 master plan](#) that has come under legal challenge. The extension would vault Aurora over the Troutdale airport in runway length but would still be smaller than Hillsboro's 6,600-foot main runway.

Aurora Airport backers say their facility has become a valuable economic resource that should be appreciated, not hauled before state land-use authorities.

"I guess they let us replace light bulbs, but that's about it," said Bruce Bennett, a professional pilot who has run several businesses at the airport. "It seems like any improvement at the airport, and they're screaming, 'Growth!'"

Bennett and Ted Millar, a prominent developer whose business is now based at the airport, both insist that the expansion plan would not have a big impact on surrounding farmland or lead to dramatic growth in the airport's business.

Concerns about the airport's future spiked, however, when Bennett, Millar and others last month began funneling money into city campaigns.

They're backing the mayoral bid of [Ben West](#), a city councilor who cast the

lone vote last year against Wilsonville joining the legal challenge filed with the [state Land Use Board of Appeals](#).

The businessmen also donated to two council candidates running against incumbents who had supported the legal action. [John Budiao](#), a utility electrician, is opposing Council President [Kristin Akervall](#), and [Imran Haider](#), a teacher and businessman, is challenging Councilor [Joann Linville](#).

The current mayor, Tim Knapp, is prevented by recently enacted term limits from running again. Instead, West is opposed by [Julie Fitzgerald](#), who heads the Oregon Zoo Foundation and is a former city councilor. She regards the legal action as a good way to give the city a voice in issues raised by airport expansion.

## **Campaign cash attracts attention**

While not large by big-city standards, the airport-related contributions stood out in Wilsonville, population 25,600.

West has received at least \$14,000 from airport interests, more than a third of the \$39,000 he's raised. In the last contested mayor race, in 2012, Knapp raised less than half that, \$16,000. His opponent that year didn't show any fundraising.

This year, Budaio received at least \$5,000 in airport-related money – also just over a third of his fundraising – and Haider received at least \$2,000, which represents almost all the money he's raised.

Most of the contributions came from JOBS Political Action Committee, which in turn received equivalent amounts from airport backers. Bennett and Millar said they hired Salem lobbyist J.L. Wilson, who controls JOBS PAC, to work with them on airport issues. And they gave Wilson the flexibility to decide how to direct the money to the three candidates. Such campaign-finance maneuvers are legal under Oregon law.

Airport supporters helped sponsor a fundraiser on Sept. 18 for the trio that included a video appearance from state Sen. Betsy Johnson, D-Scappoose. On Sept. 29, West's campaign committee gave \$800 each to Haider and Budaio, saying it was their share of the proceeds from the fundraiser.

Johnson said she got to know West – a nurse who first became known in Oregon as one of the plaintiffs in the successful lawsuit to overturn Oregon's ban on same-sex marriage – while working with him on foster-care issues.

But Johnson, who played a key role in creating the Oregon Aviation Department, is a fervent supporter of the state's smaller airports. Her husband owns an aviation company at the Scappoose airport.

In 2007, she introduced a [controversial bill](#) that would have allowed airports such as Scappoose and Aurora to seek a share of property-tax revenues from nearby properties for airport-related infrastructure. Lehan, the former Wilsonville mayor, opposed the bill, and it never got out of committee.

Johnson called the opposition to the runway extension "hyperbolic" and said, "I yearn for a time when everybody can sit down and work it out. ... These are reasonable businesspeople."

## **An uncertain future for farmland**

One of the big arguments made by Johnson and other airport backers is that their plans don't pose a threat to agriculture.

"We love farmland, because we don't want houses and hospitals built off the end of the runway," said Millar, adding that the runway extension itself won't cover any current farmland. However, the extension would require the purchase of around 50 acres of farmland as a buffer.

While Millar said these lands can continue to be farmed after the runway is

built, critics say they could be converted to other uses.

“The only way to ensure that farmland stays in farm production is to keep it as zoned for exclusive farm use,” said Jasmine Zimmer-Stucky of [1000 Friends of Oregon](#), the nonprofit formed in 1974 to protect the new state land-use system.

“Once it gets brought into the airport,” she added, “farming will take a backseat to the needs of the airport.”

Zimmer-Stucky, the group’s working lands engagement coordinator, said the area near the airport has some of the best farmland in the Willamette Valley. But it is also under heavy development pressure because it’s close to freeway interchanges and on the fringe of the Portland metropolitan area.

The process can snowball, she said, with each parcel taken out of farming making it more difficult to stop development on the land next door.

“It’s flat land close to cities, that’s what happens,” said Zimmer-Stucky.

Farmers grow a wide variety of crops in the northern part of the valley, she said, and it’s also the center of the nursery industry. One farmer who would be particularly affected by the runway extension – because the most direct road he uses to get to some of his fields would be closed – grows kale, collards and other vegetables he sells to a supermarket chain.

The legal appeal itself starkly describes the current Wilsonville leadership’s opposition to extending the runway without a full study of the land-use issues involved.

“Wilsonville does not dispute the importance of Airport operations that benefit the community and public, in particular the helicopter operations used for farming and emergency related operations,” the appeal says.

“Wilsonville does, however, object to corporate business interests commandeering cheap farmland to accommodate large corporate jets.”

The appeal adds that, "At worst," the expansion is a "deliberate attempt to subvert public process and Oregon land use law for the benefit of a select few wealthy corporate interests."

## **The view from Charbonneau**

About two miles north of the airport is [Charbonneau](#). That's a 3,000-resident planned community that was itself once seen as a major threat to farmland when it was built just across the Willamette River from Wilsonville. Anger over the development of a big residential community on prime farmland helped spark the passage of Oregon's pioneering land-use controls in 1973. That law sought to limit urban sprawl and protect farms, forests and other natural areas.

Charbonneau is now part of Wilsonville and has long since become a hotbed of concern about airport expansion.

"There are land speculators all over the place that are waiting for a crack in our exclusive farm-use rules," said Wayne Richards, chairman of the community's civic affairs committee. He said he also worries about noise and toxic emissions from aircraft, which he fears could worsen if larger planes can land at the airport.

"We like them here," Richards said of the airport. "We just don't want them any bigger."

Airport businessmen Bennett and Millar say they don't expect any big increase in flights if the runway is extended. For the most part, they say, it's a safety improvement that will also allow planes to operate more efficiently because they can carry more fuel and payload.

They both say the airport isn't a magnet for air-freight service and does not have the facilities for scheduled passenger flights. A longer runway would better accommodate increasingly popular turbofan jets, which they said are

more fuel-efficient and quieter.

Would the runway expansion make Aurora a major corporate jet airport?

"I hate to break it to you," said Johnson, the state senator, "but it already is."

Still, she also downplayed the notion of a big increase in private jet traffic, saying the facility just isn't big enough for that.

But Lehan and other critics say they are not so sure about how the airport could evolve. Lehan pointed out how rapidly Amazon is expanding as retail is increasingly going online.

"I don't know that they would be so quick to say they would never consider" having an operation at Aurora, she said of Amazon.

In any case, West, the mayoral candidate backed by Bennett and Millar, said he is primarily concerned about working collaboratively with an airport he calls a "huge asset" to the city. It provides a lot of jobs and economic activity for the city during these uncertain times.

"I want a stable, healthy workforce that's close to work," he said, adding that the airport is only a short drive to Wilsonville, generally in the opposite direction of most I-5 commute traffic. "To me, that's good for the environment," he added.

His political opponent, Fitzgerald, hastens to note that she also believes the airport is a "great thing to have nearby." But she said she doesn't want businesses moving to the airport to avoid paying the cost of urban services in Wilsonville.

And Fitzgerald said that airport growth does cause further backups at I-5's Boone Bridge over the Willamette River. Since airport traffic feeds into an interchange just south of the bridge, it has an outsized impact, she said. And because the airport is outside the city, she added, Wilsonville is limited

in the tools it can use to influence the airport's development.

"What's important to me," she said, "is having a seat at the table with big developments that can affect Wilsonville citizens. And just ignoring it and saying, 'It's fine,' and then later you end up with a big traffic impact because you didn't look at it, that doesn't feel very good to me."

