

A proposal rejects lengthening the runway for at least two decades: Aurora State Airport won't grow under plan

The Oregonian, April 7, 2011
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The Aurora State Airport runway would remain 5,000 feet long for two more decades under a proposal released last week that capped a three-week debate about a runway extension.

The state's aviation board will consider the proposal during its April 21 meeting. A public comment period will remain open until then.

Although many area officials agreed with the initial plan, at least one airport businessman said he hopes state planners reconsider an extension.

"Strictly for political reasons, they're not recommending it," said Bruce Bennett, who owns Aurora Aviation at the airport. "To see jobs and safety compromised for the perceived benefit of a handful of people, I don't think is a good plan."

The airport meets federal requirements for a longer runway. But the proposal suggests strengthening the existing runway instead. The decision could save the state as much as \$5 million.

Rainse Anderson, an aviation consultant hired by the state to lead the master planning process, said, "We thought we had justification for a runway extension." But the state doesn't have funds to cover an extension that could cost as much as \$6 million, Anderson said.

He estimated increasing the current runway's weight capacity would cost \$1 million. The increase would mean planes weighing as much as 60,000 pounds could take off from the airport.

Several area homeowners supported a no-build option, saying the airport was already busy --and loud --enough. But many people who work at or fly into the airport argued a runway extension was a critical safety measure.

Wilsonville city councilors highlighted potential negative impacts on farmland and Columbia Helicopters, which is headquartered on the northeast edge of the airport. Last week's proposal cites both concerns as reasons against a longer runway.

But Bennett, the businessman, said planners afforded too much weight to noise concerns voiced by neighbors. "They want the airport quieter --as do I --but fighting to limit the runway will not do that," he said. "Those are two different subjects."

Bennett said he plans to meet with other airport property owners to create a counterproposal that would extend the runway on its north and south ends.

The proposal also outlined more than 10 specific areas of airport development, including:

- * A runway protection zone that would cover several homes. Anderson said there are no immediate plans to acquire the properties, near the intersection of Oregon 551 and Keil Road.
- * Possible development at an adjacent property along Northeast Airport Road, which now houses Beyond the Reef Theological Center.
- * A potential spot for the Aurora Rural Fire Protection District to store emergency equipment.
- * A run-up area for preflight procedures and zones for new hangars and businesses, dependent on private development.