

OpEd in Response to “Aurora State Airport: Finding Its Economic Footing”

In the past few months Pamplin Publications has run the article “Aurora State Airport: Finding Its Economic Footing” in both the Canby Herald and the Wilsonville Spokesman. Kudos to Pamplin Publications for keeping this important subject before the reading public. And, kudos to Josh Kulla for an approach that considers both the views of airport expansion and those against it, like Friends of French Prairie.

With that said, a few clarifications are in order! First, “continued public outreach” by the Wilsonville Chamber of Commerce and Oregon Department of Aviation have not helped quell “the louder voices that once expressed trepidation” about airport expansion and increased air traffic. In any case, the ‘continued public outreach’ is a myth. There hasn’t been any. Rather, the proponents have re-directed their efforts to purported economic benefits, such as building more jet hangars in anticipation of expansion, and related real estate development, and ignored the public process problems that have occurred—some of which are still simmering.

For instance, as the article stated, “runway expansion also remains on the table as part of an airport layout plan adopted last October by FAA and ODA.” However, that airport layout plan has not been formally adopted by Oregon Aviation Board, the final approving body. Further, while ODA has taken a convenient approach to county, state and federal regulations over the past few years – namely choosing which regulatory body they want to defer to as it is most beneficial for them – they now appear to be coming to grips with the legal reality that as a State agency they are just as subject to Oregon’s land use planning laws as any other agency—a fact they have ignored for many years.

Why that matters is because as the article stated, the construction of the air traffic control tower was to go out to bid in October, but ODA has ignored any and all calls for an environmental assessment by saying “we’re subject to FAA regulations” not State land use law, or that “it doesn’t have to be addressed until the airport layout plan is adopted into the Marion County comprehensive plan”, etc. And why should that be of any concern to anyone? Well, the proposed site for the tower, which will include excavation, is next to the runway at a 75 year old airport. No chance there could be any pollution from 75 years of spills or purposeful moisture draining of fuel tanks?

The points Friends of French Prairie and 1000 Friends of Oregon have made all along have not been “misinformation” as Bruce Bennett of Aurora Aviation stated. They have been facts. The kind of facts that were swept under the rug after the Oregon Aviation Board was presented with the first airport layout plan that recommended no runway expansion because of ag land impact, airport boundary complications and the overwhelming objections of community neighbors. Instead, the Board directed ODA to come back with a plan for expansion – which, of course, required coming up with a new set of data to justify expansion. That is the misinformation in this saga, not anything on the FOFP web site! This was one of the main points made in a response letter from Tony Holt, a member of PAAM and the Charbonneau Civic Affairs Committee. He went on to address the assertion that aircraft noise problems

have been resolved, saying: "Aircraft noise will be a continuing problem at Aurora....the problems have not gone away." Last month before the Wilsonville City Council, Mitch Sweikert, Director of ODA, conceded that the net effect of the tower and the expansion plans would be more bigger (mainly corporate) jets!

Those of us who oppose airport expansion for many reasons in addition to noise, are on record acknowledging the need for the air traffic control for safety reasons. Our objections include loss of ag land directly south of the airport for expansion of the runway safety zone, which has the high probability of starting "aviation related" land development pressures west to the Aurora city limits. Marion County has a history (as has been demonstrated by the Helicopter Transport Corp. development) of approving development with no infrastructure improvements or traffic mitigation. HTC employs over 100 people, and both Kiel Road and Airport Road are still two lane, with no left turn lanes—let alone a traffic signal. Why? Because they're in Marion County.

And that brings us to the dual jurisdictional problem. The airport is in Marion County, and ODA only owns the runway, but while the majority of the problems like noise are incurred by Clackamas County residents, the property tax revenue goes to Marion County. So, why worry? And speaking of employees and residents gets us to the problematic economics.

Unless something has changed recently, none of the owners of local aviation businesses live in Marion County, and neither do the majority of the employees at the airport. In fact the 2011 census data definitively lists only 3.7% of Aurora Airport workers as Wilsonville residents. So, the majority of those workers do not spend much money in Wilsonville. Where, then, is the quantification of the so-called multiplier effect of airport employee money? It's not in French Prairie, and very little of it is in Wilsonville or even Canby. The majority of it ends up much farther afield, where the paychecks are deposited.

The other economic reality avoided by aviation boosters is how few citizens can afford aircraft, own aviation businesses or benefit from public airports. According to the General Aviation Manufacturer's Association, the total economic contribution of General Aviation to the US economy is less than 1%, and clearly non-business aircraft owners and also far less than 1% of the population! Friends of French Prairie's mission is to preserve agriculture land and promote local farming. The economic arguments in support of airport expansion are bogus and illustrate the gross imbalance between public expenditure (tax dollars) and private benefit (which doesn't have to pay for their infrastructure!). In the case of aviation at public airports, the fact that the public expansion benefits so few interests actually causes negative income distribution effects. Winston Churchill, speaking about the debt owed to the Royal Air Force, once said: "Never was so much owed by so many to so few." In this case, as relates to public benefit and aviation expansion, it would read: Never has so much been provided to so few by so many!