

Controversial Aurora State Airport runway extension plan takes small step forward

Bill Poehler, Salem Statesman Journal

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The extension of the runway at Aurora Airport took a step forward, but it's got a long way to completion.

Oregon's Land Use Board of Appeals dismissed a case Wednesday in which land conservation groups, cities and a county sought to prevent the state and a group of businesses based at the airport from going forward with a long-discussed extension.

The board said in its decision it didn't have jurisdiction over how the Aviation Board reached a decision in formally adopting a master plan that includes the extension.

"It's the end of a long waste of time and waste of money," said Bruce Bennett, president of Aurora Aviation. "I should be just nothing but happy, but I still have the frustration of people fighting airport safety. I guess my rationalization of it is just misinformation."

The airport, located on the northern tip of Marion County, was constructed in 1943 and has become one of the busiest airports in the state despite its "rural" designation from the state.

The state and business owners at the airport have sought to extend its current 5,004-foot runway by another 1,000 feet to allow the aircraft currently based at the site to be able to take off with full loads of fuel, rather than partial loads as they currently do.

The decision is a setback to the groups fighting the extension, including the cities of Aurora and Wilsonville, 1000 Friends of Oregon, Friends of French Prairie and Aurora planning commission chair Joseph Schaefer.

The opponents argued to LUBA that the Department of Aviation never properly adopted the master plan that authorized the runway extension in 2011 and circumvented that approval by adopting it in 2019.

Ben Williams, president of the Friends of French Prairie, said the state is getting away with using a technicality to argue that the aviation board decision was not actually about land use.

"They're giving the Department of Aviation a pass on pretty much all of the substance to appeal," he said.

Bennett said the land needed to extend the runway to the south isn't necessarily a land-use decision.

The state has said the land it plans to acquire from a private owner south of the south runway, which is currently zoned Exclusive Farm Use, will be used as a buffer and could still remain in farm use. It will not be developed for anything.

The runway extension, Bennett said, will be on land currently owned by the state.

“Had they lengthened it six months ago, no one would know, other than the take-off is 1,000 feet farther from Wilsonville so the airplanes will be higher when they go by,” Bennett said.

Even with the LUBA decision, the runway won’t be extended any time soon.

The state still needs to find the funds for the job, which will cost millions of dollars and take years to get the necessary permissions to acquire from Marion County.

The LUBA decision doesn’t end the litigation.

A case in Marion County Circuit Court involving the same parties over the process in which the state adopted the master plan has been paused since April pending the outcome of the LUBA decision and could be reactivated.

They could also appeal the LUBA decision to the Oregon Court of Appeals.

And earlier this week, the FAA withdrew its draft environmental assessment for a run-up in the north end of the airport, stating the master plan that includes the runway extension still needs to be updated.

“Since the FAA has advised ODA that the Aurora Airport master plan is too far out of date to be considered valid and needs to be redone, one of the parties’ major goal has been accomplished,” land use attorney Jeff Kleinman said.

“There will be a process in which the most interested parties will have a full opportunity to present evidence and arguments.”

Bill Poehler covers Marion County for the Statesman Journal. Contact him at bpoehler@statesmanjournal.com or [Twitter.com/bpoehler](https://twitter.com/bpoehler)