

Expansion of Aurora Airport threatens commercial air service return in Salem

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Ben Williams, Guest Opinion



Before I retired two years ago, I traveled a great deal, mainly on Delta Air Lines. I live in the Aurora area, so you can imagine my pleasure when Delta started commercial air service out of Salem in 2007. It lasted less than two years. However, they were the best two years of my career because I didn't have to deal with a large commercial airport.

With all due respect to PDX (and its best airport awards), the fact is 25 minutes beats an hour drive, free parking beats the Port of Portland parking rates, getting through security in Salem was a breeze compared to PDX, and there's no question about the difference in traffic when you flew home mid to late Friday afternoon.

So, for those Marion County, and especially Salem residents who remember those days, I have a question: why are so many of our elected officials supporting a proposal that will guarantee that the Salem Airport will be as good as dead?

I'm referring to the various proposals to expand the Aurora State Airport and turn it into the state's largest corporate jet airport. In the last Legislative session, Rep. Rick Lewis of Silverton put forward a bill with the support of Rep. Rich Vial (Sherwood) to expand the Aurora Airport and change state land use law to allow the outright expansion of that airport onto EFU land. It has been supported vocally by Marion County Commissioner Kevin Cameron representing the county on Aurora Airport matters, who went so far as to state in his first re-election campaign communication that "my first priority is the extension of the Aurora Airport runway ..."

Nowhere along the line do any of these elected officials appear to be asking "what will this do to the Salem airport?"

My contention is that expanding the Aurora Airport as proposed in Rep. Lewis' last bill will be the kiss of death to the Salem Airport because expanding it to accommodate the largest corporate jets makes it fully capable of handling commuter jets. In fact, the Oregon Dept. of Aviation has already granted a permanent waiver to the pilot of a Bombardier jet (smaller regional commuter jet) to fly into the Aurora Airport even though that jet exceeds the weight capacity of the runway.

The Salem Airport is only 30 minutes (25 miles) south of the Aurora Airport. It is a bigger airport with a longer runway, and none of the constraints that Aurora has wedged between two major connector roads.

And the Salem airport has full municipal services, including water and sewer service, as well as access to transit and bike/pedestrian facilities, none of which are provided for at the Aurora State Airport.

Do Salem City Council members not care that their state and county colleagues are working against the interest of Salem in favor of special interests at the Aurora Airport? Why aren't they (and we) doing everything we can to save and promote the existing airport in our state capital?

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