

Aurora Airport master plan under dispute

Wilsonville Spokesman

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Revelation that the plan might not have been approved could affect grant application for runway extension



The revelation that the Oregon Aviation Board might not have approved the 2012 Aurora Airport Master Plan has created another wrinkle in the ongoing dispute surrounding the potential development of a runway extension at the airport and uncertainty about Oregon Department of Aviation projects supported by the plan.

Last year, the Oregon state Legislature's Emergency Board greenlighted the department's application through the Federal Aviation Administration Airport Improvement Program for \$37 million to build the 1,000-foot extension. The FAA has yet to decide whether it will approve the project.

However, recently appointed ODA Director Betty Stansbury sent a letter to land-use attorney Jeffrey Kleinman, who was hired by Friends of French Prairie, saying that the 2012 Aurora Airport Master Plan had never been formally approved by the Oregon Aviation Board. The master plan supported the implementation of the runway extension, unlike the previous master plan.

At the same time, the department's grant application to the FAA says that the extension is supported by the current master plan and Oregon Aviation Board Chair Martha Meeker contends that the board did, in fact, OK the plan.

The ODA provided minutes that show that the board approved the final chapter of the master plan and a draft of the master plan in separate meetings in 2011 — but they did not show the approval of the final plan.

The department also completed an air traffic control tower at the airport in 2015 based on the apparently unapproved master plan.

Master planning documents provide a framework for future projects, and government agencies typically don't move forward with projects outlined in the plan until it's approved.

"I think in simplistic terms, if a plan is not adopted, it does not carry the full force and effect of law, meaning that the projects in said plan are not valid and cannot be justifiably executed," City of Wilsonville Planning Director Chris Neamtzu wrote in an email.

And the lack of approval would mean that the FAA grant application included erroneous information.

"Does it (the potential lack of approval) imply that any aviation department grant application to the federal government, has been invalid or incorrectly done? This could implicate all sorts of funding for projects that have occurred at the airport already. It raises questions," said Mark Ottenad, Wilsonville Public Affairs director.

The City of Wilsonville has long opposed the airport extension, saying it could cause an influx of corporate jets to flock to the airport — which, in its view, would exacerbate traffic, worsen noise over Charbonneau homes, and lead to land speculation.

Friends of French Prairie President Ben Williams also has long derided the runway extension project and has requested that the ODA hand over all documents pertaining to the 2012 master planning process. "We're not opposed to aviation and the Aurora Airport," he said. "What we're opposed to is converting the airport into the largest corporate jet airport in the state."

After reading Stansbury's letter, Williams sent his own letter to Gov. Kate Brown, Oregon House Speaker Tina Kotek and Senate President Peter Courtney requesting that they instruct the ODA to withdraw the grant application.

"It should be of great concern to our elected officials that a State agency has made an application to the Federal Government for funds, and in part that application is predicated upon what any reasonable person would construe as a misrepresentation of the underlying master plan," the letter reads.

The question of why seven years passed without the plan's formal approval and why there's confusion about it isn't totally clear.

However, when the ODA transitioned from being the aeronautics division within the Oregon Department of Transportation to its own state agency in 1999, it apparently didn't realize until many years later that, as its own agency, it needed to formalize a state agency coordination program, which is used to make sure "land use programs are carried out in compliance with statewide planning goals," according to the state website.

The board adopted the program in 2017, but it hasn't been formally approved by the Department of Land Conservation and Development. ODA Project Manager Heather Peck said the department thought the program needed to be approved before the board could approve the master plan update but then said the ODA learned last week that it did not need approval.

In turn, she said the board can soon consider the master plan update.

As for the grant application submitted months ago, Peck noted that the Airport Layout Plan (ALP), which is included in the master plan and shows current and future facility plans at the airport, had been approved by the FAA.

"The FAA will only fund projects in master plans that they have approved whether or not they have had local jurisdiction approval," Peck said.

However, as was noted in an Oregon Solutions report on the runway extension dispute, the FAA cannot approve a master plan.

"The bottom line is that the airport layout plan is a subset of the master plan and the master plan is subject to statewide goals, whereas the airport plan is subject to FAA rules and regulations," Williams said.

Meeker, for her part, said projects cannot go forward without the backing of an approved master plan.

"I can't see the (Oregon) department of aviation going forward on a project that wasn't part of the master plan. Any project takes time, energy and needs to be an approved plan so that it's thoroughly vetted," she said. "We need an approved master plan. I can't see how we can go on a budget that doesn't have a completed master planning process."

The FAA grant application guidelines don't say that a master plan has to be completed for the application to be valid, but says the airport has to have the project ready for construction within six months of the approved application.

In the grant application, the ODA said it planned to begin environmental assessments and property negotiations for the runway extension in 2019, for final design for the project to be completed in 2021 and construction to begin in 2022. In its list of requirements, the FAA writes that projects must be ready for construction by March 2021.

Compounding the problem with the master plan approval is the fact that the FAA didn't list the Aurora Airport as an airport that would receive priority consideration for grant funding.

With that in mind, Ottenad doubts that the grant application will be approved anyway. "It seems highly doubtful ... that if you aren't on the list that you're going to get awarded money," he said.

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