

Aurora control tower up in the air

By Josh Kulla
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by: SPOKESMAN PHOTO: JOSH KULLA

The Oregon Department of Aviation expects more jet traffic at Aurora Airport if an aircraft control tower is built. But they say the safety that will come with the project is well worth it.

A planned aircraft control tower at the Aurora State Airport still could be put out to bid sometime in the next week if everything goes according to plan.

Nonetheless, the ongoing threat of federal sequestration still looms over the entire process. And if the worst case plays out, the loss of federal funding to pay for tower staffing could scuttle the control tower for the foreseeable future.

According to Oregon Department of Aviation Director Mitch Swecker, the new control tower project, which would largely be funded by lottery-backed ConnectOregon grant funds, is currently being examined by the the Oregon Department of Justice to ensure

the funding mechanisms are both legal and realistic. Once that takes place, the ODA could go to bid as early as the end of November, he said, and likely no later than early December.

The time frame for the project has been pushed back several months since a September airport tour hosted by the Wilsonville Chamber of Commerce. Still, Swecker and others at the ODA remain optimistic the project can move forward.

“It’s based on a cost-benefit analysis where the benefit is avoided accidents, the loss of life and damage to equipment,” Swecker told the Wilsonville City Council at a Nov. 18 meeting. “The cost was the staffing of the aircraft control tower.”

And therein lies the rub. While ConnectOregon money will pay for construction, it will not pay for ongoing maintenance or, more importantly, the air traffic controllers who will guide pilots in and out of the state’s third busiest airport.

According to aviation industry publications, Federal Aviation Administration Administrator Michael Huerta met last month with a dozen industry stakeholders to discuss initial planning for the next round of sequestration set to begin early in 2014, barring unlikely congressional action before then. He said 2013 sequestration cuts had cost the agency \$486 million, while fiscal year 2014 reductions could reach \$697 million. Huerta said the agency already is planning to cope through further reductions in overtime, travel, contracts and service cuts, as well as attrition and hiring freezes.

Specific examples of service cuts included phasing out funding for contract towers, precisely the area that would affect Aurora.

“Could you have a tower built and no one to operate it?” asked Wilsonville City Manager Bryan Cosgrove.

“They defunded the entire contract tower program,” Swecker replied. “But federal legislators revived it at a later date. It’s still under threat — we think there’s a good chance they won’t let new towers in the program — and I have a letter that implies that. If that’s a case, we have a lot of decisions to make as to whether we build it or not.”

It’s an open question right now — the FAA itself projects it will lose well in excess of 12,000 air traffic controllers between 2012 and 2021 through retirement, promotion, transfer, resignation and developmental attrition.

Even though a final cost estimate for the control tower has not been released, Swecker emphasized to the council that he thinks it is essential to pilot and community safety in the south metro region.

“Right now I think it’s an essential safety feature,” he said. “We’ll make the decision not in a bubble, but with the (state aviation) board and the airport community. And we’ll look at any possible alternatives to staff it. There might be a lot of unemployed air traffic controllers out there, and I’ve already got indications that might be the case.”

With more than 90,000 flight operations a year taking place at Aurora, it’s not an issue that’s going away anytime soon.

“I’ve heard from the time I started working with this department, which is about five years ago, about a lot of misses or potential for aircraft to hit,” Swecker said, pointing out the fatal mid-air collision two years ago that killed a pair of pilots over Champoeg State Heritage Area. “I don’t ever want to see that happen, and our board has been one of the biggest advocates for the aircraft control tower. I think we should build it.”