

Planning for control tower at Aurora Airport begins despite concerns

City of Wilsonville, Clackamas County feel left out of the process

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AURORA — A local coalition of governments and land-use advocates have voiced concerns that funding for an air traffic control tower at the Aurora airport is premature.

The Aurora State Airport tower funding is on the short list of projects to receive lottery-backed money through Connect Oregon III program, approved by the 2009 Legislature.

Ranked as the No. 4 project in the state for the non-freeway monies, the \$2.6 million would be leveraged to get additional money from the Federal Aviation Administration to construct a tower at one of Oregon's busiest airports.

The ranking has the city of Wilsonville, Clackamas County, the Friends of French Prairie and the 1,000 Friends of Oregon all questioning why the project is ranked so high, when the Oregon Department of Aviation still has a year to go before an updated master plan is completed for the Aurora airport.

"You are putting the funding cart before the planning horse," 1,000 Friends of Oregon representative Mia Nelson told the Oregon Transportation Commission, the body slated to designate funding for the projects in August.

Benjamin Williams, president of Friends of French Prairie, said he feels the process is working "backwards" with funding for a tower listed as a high priority, when the airport master plan process just started.

The master plan meetings, scheduled to take place this spring, were postponed due to financial constraints. A planning group first met last November and again last week.

There is a 12-month timeline to finish the airport plan.

"Yet those financial constraints did not slow down the process to seek funding," Williams told the OTC. "It goes without saying that if the master planning process has not yet begun, it will not be completed in 2010 as stated. Friends of French Prairie fully supports enhanced aviation safety of the sort promised by an air traffic control tower. We do not support a process to obtain funding prior to a completed and comprehensive master plan update that addresses noise, land use, traffic and infrastructure matters into the future."

The city of Wilsonville and Clackamas County have concerns regarding the process for Marion County, the city of Aurora and the Oregon Department of Aviation agreeing on an impact area that doesn't include any part of Clackamas County or the city of Wilsonville.

The north end of the Aurora Airport is a few hundred feet from the Marion and Clackamas county line.

When Wilsonville's public affairs manager Mark Ottenad pointed out the study area — agreed to in the June 2010 intergovernmental agreement between Aurora, Marion County and the ODA — OTC

chairwoman Gail Achterman, called it “strange.”

“At this time, neither Clackamas County nor the city of Wilsonville has been consulted by the (Oregon) Aviation Department in any real, meaningful fashion regarding a control tower at the Aurora Airport,” Ottenad told the OTC. “The department has omitted this important first step for developing a successful project — constructively engaging all of the adjacent, impacted jurisdictions.”

Clackamas County Commissioner Jim Bernard agreed.

“We do support the master planning, and I am actually on the committee,” Bernard told the OTC Wednesday. “However we have not had a meeting yet. We originally talked about being a partner in this in February 2008, and again we haven’t even had a meeting. We have been disregarded in the IGA process and we would appreciate the opportunity to actually be a part of that discussion.”

OTC staff will be creating a staff report and answering commission questions before the August meeting, when the funds will be awarded.

Wilsonville’s South Metro Area Regional Transit (SMART) also has a project ranked seventh on the list. It is expected that SMART will receive the \$1.95 million for a new operations facility. OTC commissioners said the first 41 projects on the list — approximately \$94 million — will most likely be funded.