

Aurora Airport master planning deliberations begin

By Corey Buchanan, Wilsonville Spokesman

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The committee tasked with providing input on planning meets for the first time

A committee tasked with providing input during the master planning process for the Aurora State Airport met for the first time Tuesday, Nov. 16.

The first of seven meetings for the committee — which is composed of both airport advocates and those worried about future plans there — took place over Zoom and included mostly information from staff about how the process will unfold.

David Miller, a Century West consultant hired by the Oregon Department of Aviation to work on the plan, detailed these elements and said that a forecast will be conducted to assess how air traffic might change in the next 20 years. It will also include an identification of the most demanding class of airplanes that regularly flies at the airport, an evaluation of the airspace surrounding the runway and the creation of a layout plan that will inform future airport projects.

The new master plan will also include an evaluation of existing needs and options for addressing those issues, which will be reviewed by the committee. Then the plan will determine a strategy for achieving these goals, he added.

"We have a lot of work to be completed in the next year and a half so the project will be moving at a steady pace," he said.

The aviation department is going through this master planning process after the Federal Aviation Administration had said it must do so to receive grant funding for projects, which the state agency heavily relies on for improvement efforts. The department also said it's standard practice for such plans to be completed every 10 years and the previous process took place in 2011.

Miller also said that any project within a previous master plan that was not completed will be revisited. This will likely include a 1,000-foot runway extension project designed to provide safer landing for larger planes — which has been the source of litigation and controversy for the past few years. The runway was extended in 1995 from 4,100 to 5,000 feet, but remains comparatively short considering the airport's status as the fourth busiest in Oregon.

The planning process will also include an assessment of noise impacts, which might be of interest to residents in areas like Charbonneau who live near the facility and have expressed concern about loud planes flying over their homes at all hours of the day. Miller also said that the air traffic control tower constructed in the mid-2010s will help better identify current and future plane volume than previous plans did. Charbonneau resident Wayne Richards posited that the previous plan underprojected future activity there.

"It's a great help to us. It makes a lot easier work of accurately documenting aircraft movement, takeoffs and landings," Miller said, adding that the planning team will also look at hangar construction growth and the growth of aircrafts based at the airport.

A couple members of the public, including Wilsonville resident Steve Benson, expressed dismay during the meeting that their neighborhood wasn't represented on the PAC. The ODA suggested Benson consult with the city of Wilsonville to speak for him and his neighbors.

"Every year we hear more and more traffic flying over our house," said Benson, who lives in the Daydream Ranch neighborhood.

Though it's considered to be advisory, the committee cannot decide what will go in the plan nor provide recommendations to the ODA. Instead, department staff will have sole power to do so.

Ben Williams, the president of Friends of French Prairie and PAC member, was sharply critical of this dynamic.

"I just have to wonder how you're not embarrassed that you label this committee as advisory, quote unquote, but have already predetermined that you will take no recommendations or advice from the committee," he said.

Chris Neamtzu, the city of Wilsonville community development director, asked if it's the intention of the ODA to comply with state land use laws during this master planning process. The city and other entities have contended that this didn't happen during the previous process in 2011.

ODA staffer Sarah Lucas said that the agency intends to follow laws and that it brought aboard an Oregon Department of Land Conservation and Development representative to help ensure that.

Some speculated about what the department's plans are in the future, such as possible expansion. Lucas said that wasn't part of the discussion Tuesday but will be addressed at future meetings.