

Mayors of the Aurora State Airport Area Communities

Aurora



Wilsonville

December 13, 2021

The Honorable Kate Brown, Governor of Oregon
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**RE: Issues of Public Concern with Oregon Department of Aviation’s
Aurora State Airport Master Planning Process**

Dear Governor Brown:

We write to you as the elected leaders of the communities located in closest proximity to the Aurora State Airport to express our profound disappointment at the Oregon Department of Aviation’s biased handling of the Aurora State Airport Master Planning process. Our communities bear the brunt of impacts of the airport’s operations, and yet the Aviation Department appears to be discounting our concerns and is primarily responsive to vested financial interests at the airport.

This observation is true in general, as Department of Aviation staff and board members indicate meeting constantly with private-sector airport interests, while rarely meeting with local community members, city councilors and staff. Multiple communications from officials at the Cities of Aurora and Wilsonville to the Aviation Department over the past several years are generally ignored and not responded to.

The Cities of Aurora and Wilsonville, along with other Planning Advisory Committee (PAC) members to the Department of Aviation’s Aurora State Airport Master Planning process such as 1000 Friends of Oregon and Friends of French Prairie, seek to raise significant issues of public concern. This federally funded master plan has gotten off to a rocky start in a manner that demonstrates the Department’s apparent bias and inability at providing fair public processes that meet Oregon’s standards for meaningful public engagement.

We are concerned that the Department of Aviation is again making similar mistakes as it did with the 2011 or 2012 Aurora State Airport Master Plan process that both the Oregon Supreme Court and the Oregon Court of Appeals found in 2021 violated Oregon land-use and public-process laws. We request that the Governor’s Office demonstrate decisive leadership that provides confidence to local-government officials that federal and state planning processes are

conducted in a legal and ethical manner above reproach, which at this time appears questionable.

A primary concern pertains to the extremely lopsided membership composition of the Planning Advisory Committee (PAC). The Department of Aviation has stacked the Planning Advisory Committee with self-dealing financial interests at the Airport that benefit from taxpayer-funded Airport operations and capital improvements. A review of the PAC membership demonstrates that well over half of the PAC membership is comprised of entities with direct pecuniary interest in furthering airport expansion at taxpayer expense.

The same pro-airport expansion entities are represented multiple times on the PAC. Two associations placed on the PAC are composed of a majority of Airport financial interests:

- The attorney for the Aurora Airport Improvement Association represented at the June 3, 2021, Oregon Aviation Board meeting that most of the businesses at the Aurora State Airport belonged to the Aurora Airport Improvement Association.
- In a similar manner, most of the same airport entities are also members of Positive Aurora Airport Management association, a local airport operations management group.

By all appearances, the process and committee composition has the appearance of a “tick the box” exercise in public involvement. This leaves us to conclude that the outcome is predetermined and that the inevitable result will lead to airport expansion regardless of the impacts on safety, the environment and surrounding infrastructure.

Another key problem is that the Department of Aviation has omitted two key state agencies as PAC members: Department of Agriculture and Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ). The Aurora State Airport is located in the heart of the Oregon's best “foundation farmland” of French Prairie, which hosts some of Oregon's foremost traded-sector ag producers, nurseries and food processors. Real-estate speculation and uncontrolled urban-level development—as are occurring at the Aurora State Airport area—are harmful to this prime ag-sector economic cluster. By excluding the Department of Agriculture from the public process, the Department of Aviation continues a trend of excluding parties that may provide valuable information or may question the Aviation agency's objectives.

We read in the media that the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) indicates that 750 Oregon sites could expose residents to 'forever chemicals' of per- and poly-fluorinated substances or PFAS, where growing evidence points to their adverse health effects, including some cancers. In Oregon, the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is testing locations including the Aurora State Airport for known or suspected PFAS use. Again, the Department of Aviation's exclusion of DEQ demonstrates an on-going pattern of discriminatory conduct.

We understand that the Governor's Office Executive Order 20-04 on Climate Action “Directing State Agencies to Take Actions to Reduce and Regulate Greenhouse Gas Emissions” (GHG)

directs DEQ to develop strategies that “Cap and Reduce Greenhouse Gas Emissions.” We are concerned that representatives of the Governor’s Office appointed to the Oregon Aviation Board and Department of Aviation staff simultaneously are advocating for major expansion of the Aurora State Airport that results in substantial increases in aviation-gas fossil-fuel consumption and GHG emissions, contrary to the Executive Order on Climate Action.

One of the major reasons stated by aviation interests for Aurora State Airport runway extension is to increase the sale of aviation fuel so that a larger class of aircraft may takeoff from the airport with full tanks of gas. We note that the tax on aviation fuel is the primary source of operational revenue for the Department of Aviation. Thus, the Department of Aviation has a direct pecuniary interest in advocating for increased aviation-gas fuel sales that would accompany expansion of the Aurora State Airport, seemingly in direct conflict with the Governor’s Executive Order on Climate Action.

Additionally, DEQ data appears to indicate that the NMPDES (National Pollution Discharge Elimination System) permit for the Department of Aviation’s Aurora State Airport discharge into Mill Creek-Pudding River watershed expired June 30, 2017. We understand that area residents have expressed concerns for surface-water, ground-water and well-water quality due to prospective airport run-off pollutants, unregulated septic systems and potential ground water pollution. Cumulatively, these all appear to be good reasons from the Department of Aviation’s perspective to exclude DEQ from Airport planning efforts.

The Department of Aviation’s tightly controlled master planning process fails to meet the test for meaningful public engagement. The Zoom meeting format used by the Department of Aviation does not list or show all participants in the meeting and provide clear labeling of names and affiliations. It is unclear to the public who is attending the meetings and who or what entity that participants represent. At the November 16, 2021, PAC meeting, it was difficult to ascertain from many of the name labels who was attending in what role. Names and affiliations of all PAC members and staff/consultants should be clearly evident.

Additionally, some PAC members were allowed to have two representatives participate in the meeting, while some PAC members were ignored and not allowed to participate in the meeting. These elements indicate a failure of meaningful public process.

The facilitators for the PAC meeting used a series of unscientific “polls” to gauge participants’ thoughts or perspectives; however, it was unclear who was participating — was it PAC members, Aviation staff and consultants, and/or the public? Moreover, the facilitators interpreted the results of the poll that may or may not be an accurate reflection of the participants involved.

The Department of Aviation states that “As the airport sponsor, ODA staff will be the final decision-making authority. They will decide what is included in the Master Plan.” Setting aside the fact that this pronouncement at the start of a “public involvement” process sends a message that is contrary to Oregon’s Statewide Planning Goal Number 1, we believe this is false

information; only the appointed body (*i.e.*, the Oregon Aviation Board) can legally approve a master plan. The failure of the Aviation Board to adopt the 2011 or 2012 Aurora State Airport Master Plan was a centerpiece for the Oregon Supreme Court's affirmation of the Court of Appeal's decision against the Department of Aviation for failure to comply with Oregon law.

During the November 16, 2021, PAC meeting, aviation consultants indicated that they would consider nearby external "outside the fence" proposed urban-level developments in the Airport master-planning process — implying that such proposed developments would favor Airport expansion. However, the consultants gave no indication of reviewing such information in light of Oregon's EFU land-use laws, nor the potential reality of such proposed developments ever actually occurring. Additionally, consultants gave no indication of considering the "negative" aspects of proposed developments outside the Airport, such as increased surface-transportation impacts/traffic congestion and potential mitigation, increased land-speculation harming the ag industry, and increased pollution and environmental impacts.

The Department of Aviation has allowed and promoted the dissemination of false information about the seismic resilience of the Aurora State Airport. At the October 6, 2021, Oregon Aviation Board planning session and at the November 16, 2021, PAC meeting, misinformation about the seismic conditions of the Aurora State Airport area was provided without rebuttal. At the October meeting, the Aviation Board had considerable discussion on resilience, and the importance of selling the resilience concept to the public and government officials as a component of building support for state and federal funds for the Aurora State Airport expansion. Aviation Board Chair Meeker indicated a desire to improve "lines of communication" between the Governor's Office and airport businesses to promote resilience.

Contrary to statements that depict the Aurora State Airport as a crucial facility for the projected 9.0 Cascadia Subduction Zone Earthquake, the Aurora State Airport is listed at the lowest-level of Tier 3 airports in the Oregon Resilience Plan. The Tier designations "indicate the priorities for making future investments." In other words, the Department of Aviation is effectively targeting one of the lowest priority airports to prepare for recovery in the Oregon Resilience Plan for potentially one the largest airport capital improvement projects ever planned by the state.

With respect to the airport's ability to withstand a Cascadia Subduction Zone Earthquake, reports by the Oregon Department of Geology and Mineral Industries (DOGAMI) show that the Aurora State Airport is located in an area subject to major potential damage in a projected 9.0 Cascadia Subduction Zone Earthquake. The "Mid/Southern Willamette Valley Geologic Hazards, Earthquake and Landslide Hazard Maps, and Future Earthquake Damage Estimates," DOGAMI publication IMS-24, shows that the Aurora State Airport specifically is located in an area:

- Rated High for Ground Shake Amplification
- Rated High for Amplification Susceptibility
- Rated Moderate to High for Liquefaction Susceptibility

The same deep, fine soils that make the French Prairie area such exemplary foundation farmland also mean these soils are subject to amplification and liquefaction. As a result of such an earthquake, the airport runway would likely be unserviceable for a long period of time (6-12 months) post-earthquake. Rather than allow aircraft to take off or land due to an inoperable runway, the most likely role of the Aurora State Airport will be to accommodate vertical take-off and landing of heavy-lift helicopters with locally-based Columbia Helicopters and Helicopter Transport Services, neither of which require a runway extension to operate.

In all of our years of government service, we have never seen a state agency act with such disregard to the concerns of the local communities, and appropriate and fair public process. We request your intervention now to provide for an unbiased process that produces trust-worthy results. We believe that if the Department of Aviation were to comply with—rather than seek to evade—the letter and spirit of Oregon's land-use and public-process laws, judicial intervention to set a course correction would not be a necessary remedy that must be pursued by local governments and concerned citizens.

Again, we appreciate your time and consideration of these important issues, and we look forward to your response. Thank you.

Sincerely,



Brian Asher, Mayor
City of Aurora



Julie Fitzgerald, Mayor
City of Wilsonville

Enc:

- Letter from Cities of Aurora and Wilsonville to Sen. Lee Beyer and Rep. Susan McLain, Co-Chairs Joint Committee on Transportation, RE Request for Public Hearing on HB 2497 – Proposed Legislation to Create Transparent Public Process for State Aviation Department Agency Communications and Coordination with Local Governments and Communities on Aurora State Airport Issues of Concern, March 11, 2021
- Aurora State Airport in Relation to The Oregon Resilience Plan and DOGAMI Earthquake Susceptibility Maps – 2019

cc: Oregon Aviation Board
Senator Ron Wyden
Senator Jeff Merkley
Congressman Kurt Schrader
Congresswoman Suzanne Bonamici
House Speaker Tina Kotek
Senate President Peter Courtney
Representative Susan McLain (HD 29)
Representative Courtney Neron (HD 26)
Representative Christine Drazan (HD 39)
Senator Bill Kenemer (SD 20)
Metro Council President Lynn Peterson
Metro Councilor Garrett Rosenthal

Clackamas County Board of County
Commissioners
Marion County Board of County
Commissioners
FAA Mountain Region staff
Heather Fernuik, Director
Chris Schaffer, Planning & Programming
Manager
Warren Ferrell (Acting) Manager, Seattle
Airports District Office