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All airport sites are eliminated

By Elizabeth Troutman

After months of following guidelines set by the Federal Aviation Administration, members of the Oldham County Airport Board are veering from the FAA's plan and have abandoned an FAA-recommended airport site selection process.

In November, a Nashville, Tenn., aviation firm recommended 17 possible sites to build an airport in Oldham County. Now, board members have eliminated all sites from consideration, and voted to denounce any authority to recommend eminent domain to acquire land if the project continues.

At a Feb. 6 meeting, board members created a set of five objectives – outside of the FAA's stipulations – to gather information specific to Oldham County, including plans for an independent study to question whether a general aviation airport will boost the county's economy.

If an airport won't generate revenue, board members say the FAA's process to determine the possibility of developing an airport is futile – wasting time and grant money.

"If it doesn't make money, I don't want it," board member Bob Sargis said. "It's not a playground."

Other objectives include identifying specific construction costs, operating expenses and revenue for a possible airport; surveying residents for their opinions; studying an airport's impact on property values in communities with similar demographics; and keeping residents informed about the board's findings.

An independent study to assess economic impact of the project – a step that diverges from the FAA's process – will not be funded by the remainder of a grant from the Kentucky Department of Aviation.

Board chair Jonathan Westbrook asked board members for ideas on ways to organize a study, including the possibility of accessing local university researchers. Board members say an independent study could take several months to complete.

Westbrook said he will also work with representatives with the Oldham County Economic Development Authority and the Oldham County Chamber of Commerce to collect information on an airport's economic impact.

The board still has about \$130,000 in state grant funding left, but grant money is earmarked for FAA-sanctioned studies.

Joe Schoenbaechler, executive director of Oldham County Economic Development Authority, said OCEDA board members will consider whether they can use OCEDA funds to contribute to an independent study. He said the board will discuss the possibility at the next board meeting.

Schoenbaechler said the airport board needs an unbiased professional to

provide information on the economic benefits of an airport, however, OCEDA stands by the discussion of building an airport in the county.

“We support the concept of having an airport in the community,” he said.

“We want make sure we continue to address the issue fully.”

Sargis said he believes the airport board whisked ahead by tackling technical questions first, as required by the FAA, before obtaining proof of economic benefit from an airport.

Westbrook said public input is a crucial part of determining whether an airport belongs in Oldham County. He noted that public input was part of the FAA’s process, requiring three public meetings, but recalls little opposition to the project at the first public meeting in March.

While surveys collected opinions from business owners, pilots and aircraft owners, board members say there is no specific measure of public opinion. The board is collecting information on the public’s opinion of the project, which will be presented at a meeting March 6.

“We don’t have a conclusion that an airport is or is not in the best interest of the county now,” Westbrook said.

In January, Westbrook and Oldham County Judge-Executive Duane Murner met with Paul Steely, commissioner of the Kentucky Department of Aviation, to discuss the role of an airport board and seek guidance for the next step in the process.

Steely advised board members to act as “avid advocates” for the airport, but Murner said he faced a “disjoint” with Steely in his opinion.

Murner stresses the intent of Oldham County’s airport board is to operate as an unbiased group of public informants charged with the task of examining the possibility of an airport, but not push the cause.

Westbrook said airport board members have no incentive to promote the airport, and they view their appointment to the board as a public service.

Steely recommended sticking to the process outlined by the FAA, but Murner said the FAA requires airport boards to nail down a site before embarking on land acquisition and measuring public opinion.

Residents made it clear in November that the top three sites chosen by aviation consultants are not negotiable sites.

Westbrook said the FAA’s process includes public hearings for information sharing, but an airport board is not required to consider feedback from residents. When the sites were released in November, Westbrook said residents feared the board was on the brink of recommending construction.

“People assumed the announcement of these sites meant we were much further along – like bulldozers were coming,” Westbrook said.

If board members choose to return to the FAA process, they are required to launch a new feasibility study.

In November, the airport board presented plans to Oldham County Fiscal Court members, which included information regarding a consultant’s top three sites, and the cost of the project.

The airport board advised Fiscal Court members that state and federal grants would cover as much as 97 percent of the costs, leaving the county with a payment of \$500,000 over a period of five years.

The six-member board was appointed by Murner to measure the feasibility of an airport with state grant funds.

Airport board member Dan Skeeters encouraged board members Feb. 6 to remember their duty to the public. He thinks bowing out of the project would be a disservice to the community.

"I'm not ready to throw in the towel yet," he said.

Jim Pearson attended the airport board's Feb. 6 meeting with members of No Oldham Airport, an opposition group lobbying against the airport. NOA members argue an airport will hurt the environment and cause noise pollution.

He said he is encouraged that the board stepped back to conduct research and listen to public perception, but said his group's cause is far from over. Pearson said he plans to fight the prospect of an airport as long as the board exists.

"They were prudent to take that action," he said. "I wish they would have six months ago."

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