

AIRPORT: Support is broad, but not uncritical

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number of flights at the airport, months of meetings took place and correspondence circulated among all the parties involved — the airport, the neighbors, the City, the County, and ODA.

Because it is an airport, ODA has some jurisdiction over its operation. Because it became an airport district when annexed into the city of Sisters, City land-use laws apply. Because it is surrounded on two sides by Deschutes County land, the county also has a say in some matters.

The multiple jurisdictions involved made it very difficult for local citizens to get their questions answered about what the impact might be if the airport's application was approved.

The Deschutes County Board of Commissioners was initially going to hold a public hearing to hear from their Sisters constituents who reside in the County outside Sisters city limits. That meeting was cancelled.

As a part of the process by ODA to determine whether or not the airport's application should be approved, ODA sent notice to "affected property owners" that a public hearing would be held February 8 in Sisters. The purpose of the meeting was for ODA to tell the property owners generally of the effect of including the Sisters airport on the Appendix M list and to provide the opportunity for public comment.

Because the residents who have concerns about the increasing airport noise and activity have had no ability to publicly voice those concerns, other than through letters to the editor, they came to the hearing prepared to speak of their concerns and raise questions about the validity of claims made in the airport's application.

Those who support the Bensons and their airport

came to show strong general support. Everyone there on both sides of the aisle resoundingly showed support for the Flight Science program at Sisters High School, including students and teachers in the program and parents of the students.

After the meeting, Julie Benson had this to say:

"The overwhelming endorsement from the community for what we're doing at the airport was clear by so many speakers at the hearing. Our number-one priority moving forward will be to support the Flight Science program, and establish the airplane build project for the high school students. At the same time, we want to work with pilots and community members to improve noise impacts to our neighbors. Our goal is an airport which is a true community asset on multiple levels."

Whether or not the airport is included in Appendix M, the Flight Science program can continue. Of the 100 people at the hearing, only one speaker said Sisters doesn't need an airport. There was general support for the airport from all sides.

The concern of the neighbors is basically whether inclusion in Appendix M will allow the airport to increase its activities and businesses with no regulation by the City, potentially creating more of an impact on the community.

The supporters of the Bensons highlighted the flight program, the ability for medical helicopters to pick up patients at the airport, the airport's availability for fire-fighting support and emergency diversions. Several speakers already have or plan to bring their businesses to Sisters specifically because they can utilize the airport. Supporters pointed out the positive influence the airport has for increased economic develop and new jobs.

Those with questions about the impact of inclusion of the airport in Appendix M emphasized that they aren't against the airport. Their concerns have to do with the



PHOTO BY SUE STAFFORD

Outlaw Aviation students turned out in force to support their program.

broad, unclear criteria for inclusion and the fact that no one had been able to say definitively what the impact of inclusion would be on the community.

Others cited concerns about a reduction in the value of their property due to the increased noise in what had been a quiet rural setting. One speaker pointed out that reduced property values would result in less tax revenue, which would have a negative economic impact.

A major point of contention had to do with the validity and accuracy of claims made by the airport in its application to ODA. An example given stated that the Sisters City Council supported the application, when in fact, only Councilor David Asson, as a private citizen, provided his personal support.

There were a number of statements made about supporting the airport, but calling into question some decisions that were made by the owners — like extending the paved runway into a sensitive wetland area not belonging to the airport and with no permit. There were also questions about the viability of bringing a skydiving operation into Sisters.

Neighbors report that when they approached the airport regarding noise and the skydiving impact on the community, as well as possibly diminished property values and enjoyment, the airport wouldn't engage.

"From the beginning, we have been trying to negotiate

with the airport but still have not had their agreement on any discussion or mediation," Starr Ranch resident Pat Kearney told *The Nugget*.

The request was made of ODA by several citizens to put the listing decision on hold while the community works to build consensus and find common ground around issues.

After 90 minutes of community testimony, Mitch Swecker, ODA director, announced that their staff recommendation, whatever it is, will be heard by the ODA Board in early March.

In an email, Swecker said, "I recommended to the Bensons that they work with the neighbors to set up a noise-abatement committee to have a continuous dialog on reducing the aircraft noise impact on the local community. I have found this to be effective at some of our other airports. It requires give-and-take on both sides of the issue."

Criteria for Appendix M listing

In order to be included in the Oregon Department of Aviation Appendix M (Exhibit 2), which identifies an airport as a matter of State concern, the requesting airport has the burden of proof to meet one of three criteria as identified in Oregon Administrative Rules (OAR) 836.610(b) (A-C):

A. Provide important links in air traffic in this state;

B. Provide essential safety or emergency services; or

C. Are of economic importance to the county where the airport is located.

These criteria apply to a privately owned public-use airport. They are very broad and open to interpretation.

The boundary of the airport is still approved by the local governing jurisdiction, in this case the City of Sisters.

According to ODA Director Mitch Swecker, "After multiple consultations with our attorney, the airport's addition to Appendix M will enable the airport to continue to have the same uses they currently have under City code. Addition of Sisters airport to Appendix M codifies it into statutorily protected uses."

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