

Neighbors air flight concerns at city meeting

By Sue Stafford
Correspondent

Neighbors of Sisters Eagle Airport made known their concerns over the airport's impact on their lives at a City Council meeting Thursday evening, which followed a joint workshop of the Deschutes County Commission and the Sisters City Council last week. Whether their concerns will have an impact on the ground or in the air remains an open question.

Deschutes County senior planner Peter Russell noted that the Oregon Department of Aviation (ODA) record is closed to public input regarding the application by the Sisters Airport to be listed in Appendix M, which would make the privately owned, public-use airport of State concern.

To be approved for inclusion, the 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.

The criteria are very broad and open to interpretation, and advocates both for and against commercial activities at the airport have their arguments.

The ODA Board will consider the issue at its March 7 meeting in Salem, at which time public testimony on the matter will only be taken during the visitor communication time at the beginning of their meeting — not at the time they consider the issue.

Members of the local activist group Save Our Skies SOS listened but were not able to comment during the quarterly joint meeting of the Deschutes County Commissioners and Sisters City Council, as they conducted a review of the ODA hearing held February 8. The workshop was held prior to the regular City Council meeting.

Russell clarified that for the coming season, if the skydiving operation at the airport wants to land on property in the County, they will have to apply for a conditional use permit (CUP) from the County. At this point in time, no application has been received by the County and, if one were to be filed tomorrow, Russell estimated the permit wouldn't be available until midsummer.

If skydivers land in the County without the CUP, the company will be cited, which incurs a \$750 fine. If the activity continues without a CUP, they are required to appear in court.

The major concern of neighbors regarding the skydiving operation is the noise generated by the plane as it

gains jump altitude.

The County doesn't usually use noise level of an activity as criteria for a CUP. The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has jurisdiction as soon as an aircraft lifts off the ground. Neither the City nor the County has a noise restriction ordinance regarding aircraft.

When the airport was annexed into the City in 2012-13, new City code was written allowing for multiple commercial uses such as skydiving, helicopter tours, and glider flights, all activities that critics argue had been clearly forbidden by restrictions in previous deeds dating back to 1978.

Each time ownership of the airport changed hands, from Brooks Resources to Cliff Clemens, to the Arpkes, to the Goodsells, there were prohibitions on gliders and glider tow planes, parachute jumping, air shows and acrobatic flying, and overnight use by recreational vehicles and campers. In other words, the intent of previous owners appears to have been to maintain the airport as a small local airstrip.

Currently, the activities allowed by City code are under the jurisdiction of the City. If the airport is granted inclusion on the Appendix M, those activities change from



PHOTO BY SUE STAFFORD

Airport neighbors brought signs to City Hall to express their concerns about aircraft noise.

City code to State statute.

City Manager Rick Allen explained that changes could be made to the City code, but it would be a very lengthy process, involving public hearings and likely a number of appeals that could stretch out over a number of years.

Allen clarified that all those approved activities must take place on the airport property and not on any land outside the airport boundary, unless a CUP is granted for such purposes. At this time, the City has not received any applications for commercial aviation recreational activities.

Members of SOS testified during visitor communication at the Sisters City Council meeting last Thursday evening, hoping there was something to be done to delay the ODA decision until the

City and/or County officials could bring the airport to the table to talk about ways to work with the community to mitigate the noise coming from the skydiving business, which operated out of the airport last spring, summer, and fall.

The members of SOS asked for several things from the County and the City: They encouraged both entities to write letters to the ODA Board requesting a delay in the Appendix M decision since the entire process was new to everyone involved. The other privately owned, public-use airports have all been part of Appendix M for years, so no one had any experience dealing with that type of application. Because of that, information requested

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