

AIRPORT: Site is home to owners' engineering firm

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“That is still our priority, to have a home that is adequate for ESI to thrive,” Benson said.

The Bensons also seek to deepen and broaden the impact of the Outlaw Aviation high school aviation program.

"I want to create a magnate program for flight science," she said.

Benson reported that opportunities to align curriculum to take advantage of a developing partnership between the Central Oregon Community College aviation program and Horizon/Alaska are presenting themselves.

"That's where I want to focus my energies, on making sure the kids have those opportunities," she said.

She said she is also working on a plan for students to build a hangar at the airport as a CTE (Career Technical Education) program.

Some of the airport's operations have been the focus of conflict and controversy — particularly a sky-diving operation. Some local

residents contend that the airport noise and increased commercial activity is negatively impacting the quality of life that attracted them to Sisters in the first place — namely, a quiet rural lifestyle. They fear reduced property values and difficulty selling their property, also due to the increased noisy activity at the airport.

Benson emphasized to *The Nugget* that the skydiving operation and the airport are separate entities and that, as a public-use airport, they are obliged not to discriminate against types of use.

“The airport is not the skydive business, have no partnership or ownership interest,” Benson told *The Nugget*. “As part of our State and Federal grant obligations, the airport cannot discriminate against one aircraft (Skydivers Cessna 182), or prohibit use from public... That’s not really an option for us, to say ‘Skydivers go away.’ We could get sued for that; we’re a public-use airport.”

Benson further notes that those who have moved into the airport zone have explicitly “waive(d) their rights to subsequently complain about airport impacts.... And “have no remaining rights to complain or protest about the

protected activities.”

Benson said that the airport has not acted to enforce the airport zone waiver of rights.

Both sides in the conflict over noise have indicated a willingness to sit down and talk — and say that the other side is unwilling to do so.

Members of the local activist group Save Our Skies (SOS) at a city hearing last month asked that Deschutes County and the City of Sisters put pressure on Benny and Julie Benson to sit down for a face-to-face meeting with concerned citizens impacted by airport noise from commercial operations.

Julie Benson says that they are open to such a meeting and notes that airport manager David Campbell has met with concerned residents.

“He takes notes and listens to people who want to come and have a one-on-one conversation,” she said.

She said that she is willing to “come to the table” with SOS, but that it’s not clear if anyone can act to represent the members of the group, or whether mitigation of impact is the goal.

“SOS is not willing to mitigate (noise impact) — they just want it to stop,” Benson said.



PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

Sisters Eagle Airport has a noise abatement protocol, but no control over pilots' actions after takeoff.

She said that mitigation is possible. The airport has a noise abatement protocol, which is clearly stated on a large sign affixed to one of the airport buildings. However, the airport cannot enforce a particular action on the part of a pilot once they leave the ground.

Benson acknowledged that there are mechanical adaptations that could make a difference with propeller noise on the skydiving aircraft — such as installing a three-bladed propeller or adding a muffler.

“Absolutely, I believe there are some mechanical modifications that would help that plane,” she said. “They’re expensive. Who’s going to pay for that? That’s absolutely something that could bring to the table — if we can get to

the table.”

There is at least an opportunity for the impasse over “getting to the table” to be broken. The airport has hired Anne George as a facilitator “to meet with the two parties to further communication and cooperation,” according to Benson.

Meanwhile, there is one more procedural hoop to jump through. “Because Appendix M/Exhibit 2 is in an administrative rule, we have to go through the official rule making process to add Sisters airport to the list of privately owned public use airports of state significance,” ODA Director Swecker told *The Nugget*. “Nothing changes but there will be another public comment period.”



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