

Council votes to help fund airport

Written by George Browning

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The Washington County Commissioners helped offset a \$225,000 road block in the way of the new Salem Airport at the group's December meeting by committing that amount out of the county's EDIT fund.

The process took another step forward when the county council voted 5-1 to support the commissioner's decision at its regular meeting Jan. 4.

The only person on the council who opposed spending the money was Mignon Marshall. She said her vote reflects what the people in the community have told her.

"I have talked to a lot of people and a lot of people have talked to me and said don't cast my vote to spend my money on entertainment, and that's what this is," Marshall said. ". . . I hope what you all are saying is correct and I will be the one to admit that I was wrong, but I represent the people in the county. My voice is for them and they don't want their tax dollars to go to this. The people have asked me to vote this way and that's why I did."

Prior to the call for a vote there was lengthy discussion about whether or not the county should support the airport project with EDIT funds.

"There are two separate issues here," said Councilman Mark Manship. "There are some people like me who think the new airport is a good idea and some people who think it's a bad idea. The other issue is economic development and a project that can go there, that can bring some additional business and some additional jobs, and I hope we can all get behind that."

Manship said he can't imagine that any project that is expected to have more than \$20 million impact locally being a bad thing.

Initially during the discussion the council seemed split. Several members voiced concern about committing the money and then the FAA deciding not to go forward with the project.

Councilman John D. Fultz said he would feel more comfortable in waiting until members of the air board take a trip to Washington later this month to try to hurry the federal government along.

"I think we should wait until after this trip to Washington takes place," Fultz said, "because we thought the bids were going to be let out next month for the truck route and then we get a surprise and they say 2017 and then 2015. So we got a big surprise on that, so I am not sure they (the air board) are going to get all that they are asking for."

Manship said sending air board members to Washington without the necessary local funding in place would be hazardous to the project.

"They certainly won't get (the money) if there is not the support of the local community and the government here to provide the local match," Manship said. "If they go there without all the funds in place locally, why should (the federal government) go out on a limb if we don't have the money to back up our part of it."

"I think we ought to make it clear that we will make this commitment if the other funding is approved."

Just like some members of the council, members of the public who attended the meeting were split, as well.

JD Martin said he thinks EDIT money should benefit more taxpayers than just those who use the airport.

". . . I don't want to see those EDIT funds used on an airport that I would say less than one percent of the people will ever use," he said. "When people talk about economic development they only talk about the best-case scenario and they don't tell you about what could possibly go wrong. I think there are a lot of things that could go wrong. I don't want to see my neighborhood leveled simply because there are a group of individuals in this county who want an airport!"

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Rhonda Greene, who owns Greene Woodworking and Glass in Campbellsburg, said she doesn't necessarily support the new airport, but she does like the idea of what is being planned with Salem Speedway and the old one.

"As a small businesses owner I see it as not so much putting money towards a new airport, but going ahead and freeing up the old airport so that other uses can be made of it," she said. "If Lucas Oil does go ahead and take over the raceway, that would be an incredible boost and add an unholy amount of jobs to this community that's suffering.

"If \$75,000 a year can actually go toward trying to disentangle what stood in the way of Lucas Oil actually taking over the raceway this last year, if that is what the purpose of it is, I don't personally care what happens with the airport after that."

The next step in the county's support of the airport project will come in May when the commissioners amend the county's EDIT plan.

The Dec. 4 council vote was a show of support that when the commissioners amend the EDIT plan, they will provide the funding for the appropriation.

The council's next meeting will be Feb. 1 at 9:30 a.m. in the Washington County Government Building.