

?Salem Common Council fails to support concept of airport

Written by

Wednesday, 17 September 2008 00:00 - Last Updated Wednesday, 17 September 2008 14:32

The City of Salem Common Council met in regular session on Monday, September 8, with all members present.

The minutes of previous meetings and all claims were approved unanimously.

Citing a lack of specific details in a request by Salem Municipal Airport Board of Aviation Commissioners (BOAC) President, Bill Barnett, for the Council to grant the BOAC the authority to begin negotiating a lease/purchase of the existing airport for special weekend events and the eventual sale of the facility, Salem Mayor David Bower said that the Council would have to take the request under advisement.

In telephone interviews with members of the BOAC, it was learned that multiple meetings between Bower,

Common Council President, Wally Turkhorn, different BOAC members, and the respective attorneys for the BOAC

and the Common Council have taken place in preparation for Barnett's request on Monday night.

"I'm not quite sure what happened Monday night," said Barnett in a Wednesday morning interview, "I thought

we had an understanding--an agreement in concept. All we were requesting was the support of the Council to begin

the negotiation process." Barnett would not divulge the name(s) of the individual(s) or groups who have expressed interest in leasing/purchasing the current airport during the Council meeting. However, it was widely reported in local newspapers and on various auto racing websites this spring and summer that Salem Speedway owner, Owen Thompson, seems very interested in incorporating the existing runway as part of a Motorplex, using it as a drag strip for regional and national events.

Earlier this year, Bower confirmed that he was present at a meeting with Thompson and Barnett discussing, among other issues, Thompson's interest in acquiring the current airport facility and how to dovetail that with the construction of the new airport. When asked for details after the Monday night meeting, Barnett would neither confirm or deny that Thompson was one of the two parties expressing interest in purchasing the current airport facility, citing a request for confidentiality on the part of both interested parties.

Prior to the September 8 meeting, Bower confirmed that meetings had taken place to discuss the options of how

the BOAC could begin the lease/purchase negotiations. On Friday, September 5, when asked if the published

Common Council agenda item of "Airport Project Update" was a sign that there was going to be the end of the impasse between the BOAC and the Common Council that began on April 14, 2008 when the Council unanimously

and without informing the BOAC of their intent, voted to withdraw support for the new airport project Bower said,

"Everything should work out."

After that April action, Bower and Turkhorn, as well as other members of the Council are on record as saying they

would support the new airport project if a way could be found to do it without taxpayer money.

According to Barnett, he is confident that both parties who have expressed interest in purchasing the current

airport facility are willing and able to pay fair market price which is appraised at considerable

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more than the estimated \$800,000 local match for the new airport. Federal Aviation Administration guidelines do not allow the

old facility to be sold or a selling price established until the new airport is completed. Those regulations do, however, provide for a lease with option to purchase agreement prior to completion of the new facility.

When asked what does the BOAC intend to do now, Barnett said, "We have had some informal conversation and, to be honest, we are weighing our options. We are still trying to make sense of what happened Monday night."

In other business, the Council heard from Salem Police Chief, Scotts Ratts, with an update on the purchase of

some various vehicles to replace older ones in the fleet. According to Ratts, the plan is to replace eight vehicles with two vehicles and increase foot patrols and bicycle patrols. Bower noted that the savings on automobile insurance alone would be a sizeable amount.

Ratts also requested that the Council authorize his department to hire a new officer to replace one who is resigning in mid-September. Speaking for the Council, Bower told Ratts that the issue will be tabled pending further consideration.

The Council approved a request from the Salem High School Student Council to close a portion of North Harrison

Street for Senior Night on Friday evening, October 10.

An ongoing issue dealing with a Conflict of Interest Form involving Arthur Hardin, Jr. was tabled for the third straight meeting.

An update on the long awaited mural for the walls of the Council Chambers was given. After yet another extended discussion, the Council agreed to ask the artist for a refund considering that the finished product is two years past due. Bower said that the artist told him that he received a phone call from someone (in the previous administration) instructing him to stop work on the project until further notice.

Bower informed the Council that \$49,400 encumbered from the 2007 Riverboat Revenue Sharing Funding could

be released because economic development agencies in Orange County and the Indiana Economic Development

Commission were able to find state funding to replace the encumbered funds. The money was to be use for

improvements to infrastructure at the Helsel Commerce Park, east of Salem. The Council acted on Bowers

information and voted unanimously to reverse the incumbrance.

City Clerk/Treasurer, Pat Persinger, requested and received permission from the Council to transfer funds between

various budgets to offset expected shortfalls brought on by expected delays in receiving property tax revenues.

With no further business to conduct, the Council adjourned until its next meeting date of September 11. The next

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regularly schedule meeting is Monday, October 13.