

Commentary: Salem Airport:No third option

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Turning 60 years old on my next birthday, I have only in recent years started to figure out that life has a set of rules not written down in any book or on any tablet. I realize that I should have come to that epiphany earlier in life but I but apparently, I am either a slow learner or a late bloomer—I prefer the latter but am confident which one my life long friends would say. That notwithstanding, one of those unwritten life rules is that in really difficult situations there is no third option. What I mean by that is that at certain milestones in life's journey, there is no going back; you must take one of two pathways at a fork in the road.

Putting the metaphors aside, the Salem Common Council (SCC) and the Salem Municipal Airport Board of Aviation Commissioners (BOAC) are at one of those milestones. The well documented controversy between these two governmental entities, one elected and one appointed, has gone on since this new city administration took office back in January.

In general, county residents fall into one of four categories when it comes to the question of the new airport facility:

- Those who support the project;
- Those who oppose the project;
- Those who don't care about the project, and;
- Those who don't know about the project.

Although I have nothing more than anecdotal conversations with a significant cross section of people all over the county upon which to base my opinion, I have concluded that the vast majority of Washington County residents (understand that this is an issue impacting all county residents, not just Salemites) fall into the third group. The common theme I have picked up from my conversations is that most people see little if any impact on their lives if the new airport is or is not build. The first two groups, as is the case with most controversial issues, are most accurately described as "vocal minorities." I am willing to bet a month's salary that neither side of the debate could muster 2800 people (10% of the 28,000 Washington County residents) to show up to a meeting of the SCC or the BOAC to support their position. In fact, I will go as far as to say that the two sides together could not get 2800 people to come out to a meeting. If my suspicions are correct, then claims by public officials that they are "only doing what the people want" are bogus. I will keep the same bet on the table for 10% of Salem residents at a meeting.

Let's face the facts (this is where the "no third option" rule comes into play), back in 2005, the previous city administration, which included some current members of the SCC, entered into agreement with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to begin the process of enlarging and improving the Salem Municipal Airport facility. When it was determined that because of environmental issues, expansion of the current facility was no longer an option, the plan was altered to the current one of building a new airport in the same general area of the existing facility. Part of that 2005 agreement called for a 2.5% local match of the total cost over 10-12 years, or roughly \$850,000. That agreement indicates that the City of Salem is on the hook for

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the 2.5% match or as much as 90% of all the money spent thus far on the improvement/relocation process which now includes offers on property, some of which have been accepted by local homeowners, if the city does not proceed with the project. Estimates of that liability range into the millions of dollars

THERE IS NO THIRD OPTION!

The aforementioned agreement, which I have a copy of, along with an email communication from Jim Keefer, FAA Manager of Chicago District Airports, clearly states that once the process starts, the City of Salem is expected to honor the contract with very few exceptions. According to Keifer's email:

"The City of Salem could be required to refund some portion of the monies spent on the proposed relocation project. The BOAC has an obligation to recover Federal funds spent fraudulently, wastefully, or in violation of Federal antitrust statutes, or misused in any manner. If the BOAC were to decide to abandon their plans to locate the airport to the proposed new location, FAA would require the BOAC to submit very convincing documentation of the reasons behind that decision. The FAA has committed a considerable amount of grant monies toward the achievement of this project. Any decision to abandon the project at this point that is not based on solid aviation, environmental, or engineering concerns would receive a high level of scrutiny to determine if waste has occurred."

Based on that information it is reasonable to assume that the City of Salem has only two options:

- Build the proposed new airport facility and pay \$850,000, or;
- Stop the proposed new airport project and pay in excess of \$850,000.

Once all the players get their heads around those two options/facts, then the wise move is to explore options of how to deal with the "lesser of two evils. In one option, the city comes up with \$850,000 and has a new, state-of-the-art airport that may or may not have significant economic impact on the community or come up with more than \$850,000 and keep the current airport.

At this point in the process, I would hope that most people with even an ounce of logical thought in their heads would see that option number one is the way to go. Once that conclusion is embraced or grudgingly accepted, the next step is to figure out how to come up with the money needed to finish the project.

That, again, has only two realistic options:

1. Pay it out of tax money;
2. Pay it out of money other than tax money.

I for one think the second option makes more sense considering that all tax revenues are expected to be down over the next few years and that the City of Salem and Washington County governments are barely getting by now on their budgets.

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If we agree that using money other than tax revenue to complete the new airport project is the less distasteful of the two options, then we need to look at strategies to raise those funds in a timely and legal manner . . .

Enter Owen Thompson. Thompson, owner of the Salem Speedway, has publically expressed interest in leasing and or purchasing the existing airport facility for an amount in excess of the \$850,000 matching funds needed to complete the new airport. In addition to Thompson, a second group of investors interested in purchasing and developing the 50 + acres currently occupied by air has recently surfaced.

Wait a minute!-- Salem, Washington County, and the surrounding area could have a modern airport capable of accommodating corporate jets and some small chartered commercial jets along with the possibility of a auto racing facility that would draw in millions of tourist dollars from all across the Midwest and it would cost us, what? Oh, yeah! Nothing, zero, nada.

Sarcasm aside, it is time for the BOAC, Mayor David Bower, and the SCC to sit down, park the egos at the door and figure out how to make this deal happen. Thompson, nor the other investor group(s), will wait around forever. We don't want to be sitting here in twenty years telling stories of what might have been in regards to the Salem Motoplex and the Salem Municipal Airport in similar fashion to the stories told today about Walmart, or the distribution center for a retail chain that has a store in Salem, not to mention several other economic opportunities that were missed/blown by community leaders in the past.

I challenge our community leaders to deal with today's reality of tight budgets, the obligations to the FAA, and the fact that "there is no third option."