

Commentary: The new airport—don't confuse me with the facts, I've already made up my mind

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by G. Wright

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The second week of January, I was instructed by my editor to cover something he referred to as “the air board meeting.” Being the smart aleck I am, the first question I asked was that if they are in charge of the air why don't they get us some warm air rather than the frigid stuff we had back in mid-January. That response alone is some indication as to the small amount of knowledge or awareness I possessed at the time about the Salem Municipal Airport and the ongoing efforts to either facilitate or thwart the expansion project.

Being the good little reporter I followed my editor's instructions and covered the January 29 meeting of the Board of Aviation Commissioners (BOAC)—talk about being out of my element. Not only was I ignorant of much of what was being discussed at the meeting, but those of us in attendance nearly got blown away by what was later found out to be tornadoes.

I knew after covering that meeting that I had to educate myself on a myriad of subjects if I was to accurately report on the BOAC and the airport expansion project. Fortunately, I had some good instructors in college who taught me not only the nuts and bolts of research but the ethical obligation to do your research before you develop your final thesis. In other words, let the evidence lead you to a LOGICAL conclusion; don't begin the process with a pre-conceived conclusion and look for evidence to support that conclusion.

With that said, I believe everyone has the right to express his or her opinion about a subject but not everyone has the right to expect that opinion to be given any credence unless it is arrived at through a logical process. When someone expresses an opinion, ask the question, “How did you come to that conclusion?” The answer to that question should determine whether or not you should value the opinion given.

For example, if I were to look at a person and say, “He/she has a terminal case of cancer and will die within the next six months.” I may be right or I may be wrong. Admittedly, I do have a bit more formal education than most people, but none of it is in the medical field. Now, if an oncologist from the Brown Cancer Center in Louisville looks at the same person and says, “He/she has a terminal case of cancer and will die within the next six month.” The doctor may be right or may be wrong. At that point, a reasonable person should ask, “How did you come to that conclusion?” Is there anyone reading this article that for one second would think my answer and the oncologist's answer to that question would be the same? Even though we came to the same conclusion, which opinion has more credence? Assuming the oncologist conducted tests and I did not, the answer is obvious.

This is a round about way of getting to something that has bothered me for the last four months as the airport/speedway story has become more intense and more convoluted. On both the public and the private stages, statements have been made by individuals that fly in the face of logical research and thought process. Facts are all that matter when determining if someone's opinion on a subject is worthy of consideration. Giving serious consideration to

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one's opinion is not the same as showing respect for that person's right to express the opinion. Everyone's opinion should be treated with respect but not necessarily with serious consideration. Here are some undeniable facts that seem to be either unknown or ignored by people commenting publicly on the issue.

- **FACT:** In its current economic state, Salem and Washington County does not need a new airport. This has been publicly acknowledged by members of the BOAC.
- **FACT:** No guarantee can be given that a new expanded airport facility will boost the economy of Washington County.
- **FACT:** The vast majority of communities throughout the Midwest that have expanded their general aviation airports runways to over 4000 feet with capability for instrument take offs and landings in the last ten years have seen a marked upswing in economic development.
- **FACT:** An extension of the existing runway to 4000+ feet is not possible because of geological problems such as sinkholes.
- **FACT:** Federal and state money derived from excise tax on aviation fuel is being used to pay for 97.5 percent of the nearly \$22 million cost of the proposed project.
- **FACT:** The local match for the project range from as little as \$400,000 to in excess of \$800,000.
- **FACT:** The accessibility to the non-local money has a limited window of opportunity. If Salem does not go ahead with the project in the near future, the funding will be reallocated to airport projects in other communities.
- **FACT:** The City of Salem is facing a budget shortfall over the next couple of years due to the "circuit breaker" cap on property tax.
- **FACT:** The present airport facility is appraised at \$850,000 as of May 28, 2008.
- **FACT:** On May 8, Owen Thompson, owner of Salem Speedway met with Salem Mayor, David Bower along with BOAC President, Bill Barnett and expressed interest in acquiring the present airport facility for a drag racing strip.
- **FACT:** Mayor David Bower has stated publicly that he is in support of the new airport if the money can be found. He also is on record as saying that he would work provide a "good deal" for any local business person interested in purchasing the current airport for the purpose that would benefit the local economy.
- **FACT:** The Salem Common Council (SCC) voted unanimously and without meaningful discussion to cease funding for the new airport project at its April 14 meeting. Council Member, Danny Libka, who also serves on the BOAC made the motion to suspend the funding.
- **FACT:** The BOAC met in Executive Session on Monday, May 5, for the purpose of discussing possible litigation against the SCC.
- **FACT:** The BOAC held a special public meeting on Thursday, May 8, at which time BOAC member Tim Peace made a motion to hire Special Council to explore possible litigation against the SCC for violations of Indiana's Open Door Law. The motion was approved 4-0-1, with Libka abstaining.
- **FACT:** All members of the BOAC along with their Special Council, George Gesenhues, were present at the May 12 SCC meeting and expressed their concern and disappointment with the April 14 decision. Mayor David Bower expressed a willingness to meet with BOAC members in an effort to work out some sort of an arrangement that would benefit the community.
- **FACT:** At the May 12 meeting, SCC Attorney, Drew Wright, gave a legal opinion that the two

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groups could meet in both closed Executive Session and open Public Session without violating the Open Door Law. Barnett invited Bower and the SCC members to the next BOAC on May 19.

- **FACT:** The schedule for the first phase of property appraisals/acquisitions was announced at the May 19 BOAC meeting. Neither Bower nor any members of the SCC (except for Libka) were present at the meeting.

- **FACT:** Property owners who end up selling the houses and land for the new airport facility will receive more than the fair market price. Consideration will be given for issues such as relocation expenses.

- **FACT:** The lengthy Federal Aviation Administration approval process for the project has taken an emotional and financial toll on the citizens whose properties are being directly affected by the new airport facility.

Looking at all of the facts and drawing logical conclusions from those facts does not necessarily mean that all people will come to the same conclusion. Logic does not cause all stakeholders to end up at the same place but it does dictate the mode of travel to the respective locations.

I want to go on record as saying that I don't have a dog in this fight. My wife and I live between Borden and Pekin. I am not a pilot—in fact, I do not enjoy flying. I fly commercially once or twice a year to visit family on the West Coast or the occasional vacation.

I have no financial interest in the outcome of the airport project whatsoever. All four of our children and their families live outside the county and it is highly unlikely that my wife and I will live here much more than another five years.

The point that I want to make is that the facts are the facts and except for the people whose emotional roots are going to be severed when they sell their homes and land for the project, emotion has no place in this discussion. We all need to look at this issue through “Joe Friday” eyes.

How often do people in Washington County repeat the mantra of “We need good jobs.”? Of course we need good jobs but how does that come about? Look at the small rural communities that have achieved the economic development so many in Washington County profess to yearn for. There are three elements these communities have in common that seem, to a greater or lesser degree, to be lacking locally; infrastructure, political will, and an educated/skilled workforce. Until all three of these come together there will be a gap between the “wanting” of better jobs and the “willingness” to do what is necessary to make those jobs a reality.

Based on the evidence in other communities, the proposed airport facility is a vital piece of the infrastructure. Along with good roads, accessibility to water and other utilities, plus rail service, it is needed to attract business. Those who look for a simply answer to a complex issues such as economic development and governmental fiscal policy, cover up their lack of knowledge on the subject by pontificating “common sense” positions that cannot stand up to scrutiny but none the less appeal to the masses.

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In conclusion, I would hope that everyone expressing an opinion on the airport expansion project or any other issue of broad community importance do their research and get the facts straight before going public with that opinion.