

FAA clarifies airport expansion approval process

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It was reported last month in The Washington County Edition that Board of Aviation Commissioners (BOAC) member, John Jones, reported on an April meeting in Salem between himself, Salem Mayor David Bower, and representatives of the Federal Aviation Administration at the May 19 BOAC meeting. It was reported at the time, as per Jones' comments, that the FAA representatives gave "verbal approval to the project with assurance that official approval would be coming in the near future."

A recent telephone interview with Bobb Beauchamp, FAA Environmental Protection Specialist, located in Chicago, and one of the two FAA representatives involved in the aforementioned meeting at the Salem Airport locations sheds new light on the approval process and the current status of that process. According to Beauchamp, he indicated to Bower and Jones that if nothing of negative consequences was found in either the Environmental Impact Study (EIS) or the Air Space Review (ASR), then the project should go forward without any foreseeable problems.

When asked to explain what these two steps in the process focused on, Beauchamp was very informative.

"The two studies focus on exactly what the titles would indicate," said Beauchamp. "The EIS will look for any significantly negative environmental impact of the new facility and the ASR will examine possible obstacles such as trees, steep hills, power lines, or cell towers that could impede operations at the new location."

When asked if anything jumped out at him while here in April, Beauchamp said nothing caught his attention that might foreshadow a problem. However, he emphasized that he was not conducting a study on his April visit and that something might arise in either study that could cause a problem, although he did not anticipate anything.

When asked how long it would be for these two studies to be completed, Beauchamp said that normally, on a project of the size in Salem, 45-90 days is the norm. Beauchamp also indicated that several phases of the project could be in progress concurrently, these two studies being just one example of that concurrent scheduling.

As an afterthought, Beauchamp was asked if the "two steps forward, one step back" history of the process here in Salem is unusual. He said that each case is different but this is not at all unusual. He went on to say that it is rare to find the type of geological conditions that caused the original plan of expanding the current runway to be scrapped in favor of developing a whole new location.

"That delay could not have been anticipated," said Beauchamp.

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Beauchamp ended his comments by saying that once all the federal guidelines are met, the only other issue that could stand in the way of the new airport would be a problem with local funding.