

SV, Santa Cruz Keep Sky Park In A Holding Pattern

Sky Park

By DENISE SIEBENTHAL
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The Santa Cruz city manager has termed it "a loser, financially speaking."

The Scotts Valley city administrator has called it "incompatible with the surrounding land use."

What's at issue is the future of Sky Park Airport — owned by the city of Santa Cruz but sitting in the middle of Scotts Valley on what's considered to be prime commercial land.

And now it's up to the Santa Cruz and Scotts Valley city councils to decide what to do about the airport.

The small airport has gained a new controversial and political image largely due to a recently completed master plan which details a 20-year enlargement and safety improvement program for the airstrip.

It's become a thorn in Scotts Valley's side and a big question facing the city of Santa Cruz.

Scotts Valley city councilmen have taken an official position against any enlargement of the airport's operation, deeming it a safety hazard.

What also may be eating at Scotts Valley is that the airport sits on a \$2 million piece of property facing one of the city's

main streets and adjoining the city's major shopping center.

The airport land is designated as research/industrial park in Scotts Valley's general plan.

On the other side of the coin, the Santa Cruz City Council recently accepted the airport master plan which calls for just what Scotts Valley doesn't want — a doubling of the 1978 level of 72 planes to 150 permanently based planes and 40 "transient" planes.

But it also advocates something that Scotts Valley does want — safety improvements.

Jim Dahm, who's operated the airport under contract with Santa Cruz since 1968, is pushing for the city to apply for federal funds to do the improvements listed in the master plan.

He says enlargement isn't really the question because the airport is naturally growing toward 150 planes, with over 100 planes currently. It's the safety improvements Dahm says he wants to see.

What's Planned

The airport has an accident rate slightly above average, but the rate is declining, the master plan's technical report notes.

There have 20 accidents related to the airport and two pilots have been killed since 1964.

Safety hazards are Scotts Valley's big worry. City Administrator Doug Byrd put it blunt-

ly in a letter to the SC Airport Commission.

"We are hopeful that it won't take a fatal plane crash in a populated area to convince the city of Santa Cruz and the airport commission that the present facility is incompatible with the surrounding land use," Byrd wrote.

"Two bottled gas sales facilities adjacent to the runway are the greatest existing problems and other problems could arise if the currently undeveloped, commercially-zoned property in the clear zone is intensively developed," the report states.

The clear zone is the air space through which planes take off and land and the surface below.

The report adds that the nearby Kings Village Shopping Center and Spring Lakes mobile home park aren't situated to pose a hazard.

But the plan warns that the airport may lose its "acceptability" if measures aren't taken to prevent new development nearby.

The airport has watched building being constructed around it, not vice versa.

It's been in its present location since 1946, with the city of Santa Cruz buying it in 1962.

Since then, Scotts Valley has become a city and has allowed the construction to occur that current city officials point to as being endangered by the airport.

In the recent past, however, a former city council refused the Bank of America's request to build a bank

whether this land should also be annexed to Santa Cruz.

Another way to solve some of the safety problems is to change the flight pattern of the planes that take off and land at Sky Park.

"The current pattern or circuit is for the planes to fly up Mount Hermon Road, along Scotts Valley Drive, over Green Valley and back to the airport or the reverse," Dahm explained.

"The new pattern would follow Mount Hermon Road more directly, turning right along the freeway, right again over the Graham Hill horse grounds and back into the airport along the Mount Hermon bypass," Dahm added.

This new route would mean planes would fly less over residential areas, decreasing noise and the possibility of a plane crash injuring or even killing people on the ground.

Also, the way the runway is constructed is deemed unsafe and there's the danger of overhead wires in the path of planes taking off and landing.

The present runway and taxiway don't meet federal and state standards regarding the separation of planes from other objects at the airfield, the master plan points out. It proposes to underground the wiring along Mount Hermon Road.

The Cost

For years, the city of Santa Cruz has lost money on the airport operation, but Dahm insists that the expansion and improvement plans won't cost

\$200 a month and the lease runs until 1993.

The city is going to have to renegotiate the lease to get the federal funds. The plan points out the FAA won't give the city any money unless it removes a provision from the contract which gives Dahm exclusive use of the airport.

But there are some hidden financial advantages to owning the airport.

While the city paid \$190,000

for the land, \$120,000 of which came from the sale of another piece of land bought by airport enthusiasts, the Sky Park site now is estimated to be worth \$1.5 to \$2 million.

It's also pointed out in the master plan that the airport attracts businessmen — and their money — to the area.

What's next

The next step is for the Santa Cruz City Council to decide if it wants to apply for the federal

funds and make the improvements.

Although the council agreed to pay for the plan in a narrow 4-3 vote last week, it was made clear the plan was not being adopted and a call was made for a summit meeting with Scotts Valley councilmen.

Scotts Valley enters into the picture for a number of reasons. If Scotts Valley doesn't adopt airport hazard and height restriction zoning and doesn't amend its general plan to rec-

ognize the airport's existence, federal funds won't come through, the master plan warns.

Also, the plan suggests Scotts Valley should have greater influence in the airport's operation.

Of the call for a summit meeting, SV Mayor Ray Carl said, "I certainly do like this idea because it has to be ironed out, this question of the airport itself and whether or not it's going to be improved."

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the Bank of America's request
to build a bank on Mount
Hermon Road in the airport's
clear zone and the site of a
proposed shopping center on
Mount Hermon Road is also in
this clear zone.

So not only is the airport
situated on prime commercial,
but it's very existence is tying
up other pieces of land from
development.

To solve these problems, the
master plan proposes that Santa
Cruz buy about six acres,
including the gas sales offices,
around the airport to protect
the land from development.

It further proposes that the
city obtain easements on about
5.6 acres, including part of
Kings Village, so it can control
the height of buildings con-
structed in these clear zone
areas.

Once purchased, it would be
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The Cost.

For years, the city of Santa
Cruz has lost money on the
airport operation, but Dahm
insists that the expansion and
improvement plans won't cost
taxpayers a dime.

The idea behind the master
plan is to get about \$2 million
from the Federal Aviation Ad-
ministration to make safety im-
provements and, to a lesser
extent, increase the use of the
airstrip.

Dahm said he's excited about
the funding program because,
he insists, it won't cost tax-
payers any money.

Cities now are required to
put up 19.41 percent of the cost
— which would mean \$316,290
for Santa Cruz — but legislation
is now pending to charge
smaller airports only 10
percent — which would mean
\$162,900 for Santa Cruz.

And there's another catch.
The federal government will
consider the cost of buying an
airport as the city's share.

Since the city spent \$190,000
to buy the site, it wouldn't have
to put up any funds if the 10
percent is required.

"You could see why I got
excited. I could see where we
could do a lot of improvements
to the safety of Skypark Airport
without using any local money
and without asking taxpayers
for any money."

But the airport currently is
costing taxpayers.

They've already paid some of
the city's \$3,000 share of the
\$33,000 cost for the master plan,
environmental impact report
and site study required to get
the federal funds.

And taxpayers have been
paying more in a subtle way.
The airport is a money loser,
according to City Manager
Koester.

"It's a loser financially
speaking," Koester said.
"There's practically no reven-
ue, though we do have an invest-
ment there of a quarter-
million dollars."

According to the technical
report, the city has spent about
\$229,600 on the airport since
buying it.

The money is being spent for
an airport where only 27
percent of the planes are regis-
tered to city residents, the re-
port adds.

Each year, the airport loses
money. In 1977-78, for instance,
it cost taxpayers about \$8,840.

While \$13,873 came in from
Dahm's rent, property taxes on
planes and from grants and
donations, there were expenses
of \$22,693.

And the cost to taxpayers
now is said to be higher because
property taxes were reduced by
Proposition 13.

The master plan suggests the
city renegotiate the lease it has
with Dahm in order to get more
money. Dahm presently pays