

Report: Airport needs control tower

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Watsonville is gaining support in its attempt to get a control tower at its airport.

An updated Regional Airport System Plan affirms the need for a control tower, based on the increased traffic at the airport and projections of continued growth. The plan was prepared by the consulting firm of McClintock, Becker & Associates of Foster City, which was commissioned by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments.

The association's Board of Directors last week adopted the recommendations made in the regional plan, including a suggestion that the Watsonville Municipal Airport get a control tower.

"Provision of a control tower is perhaps the most urgent and pressing need with regard to the airport's airfield ... infrastructure," the report says. "It is estimated that aircraft traffic will be of sufficient volume by the mid 1990s to warrant development of an FAA control tower."

The Watsonville airport is home base to about 300 airplanes, and the consultants predict that by 1990 there will be about 420 planes based there. The city's own airport master plan also predicts 420 planes permanently based there by 1990. Both plans predict continued growth, with 575 planes based in Watsonville by the year 2005.

The regional airport plan does not specifically address another problem at the Watsonville airport — the prospect of

the city's losing FAA support for its instrument landing system.

Airport Manager Vern Ackerman told the City Council last month that the FAA has indicated it would not take over the maintenance of the instrument-landing system.

The system is crucial to pilots trying to find the airport through heavy clouds. The system sends out signals that pilots use to locate the runway. Without the system, pilots who want to come to Watsonville would have to land in Salinas or San Jose when the weather is bad, then drive to Watsonville, Ackerman said last month.

Insurance costs for the person who maintains the system have gone up considerably, and the city may have to shut it down if the FAA does not offer any assistance.

The instrument-landing system was installed in 1974, largely with funding from the FAA.

Although the instrument-landing system was not part of the regional airport plan, it was discussed by the AMBAG board of directors last week, said Nick Papadakis, AMBAG executive director. The board will be given a specific resolution next month to show its support of FAA maintenance of the instrument-landing system, Papadakis said.

"Obviously if you need a tower, you need an instrument-landing system," he said.

The AMBAG board is expected to approve two resolutions next month, one supporting FAA maintenance of the instrument-landing system, and another supporting the eventual

construction of a control tower at the Watsonville airport, Papadakis said. Both resolutions will be sent to the FAA, as will the Regional Airport Plan Update.

The plan was an update of a 1979 regional airport plan. One reason the update was needed, Papadakis said, was that the closing of the Santa Cruz Sky-park Airport was a big change for local aviation.

Because of that closing, the consultants listed several alternatives for planning for airport growth. Alternatives included allowing unlimited growth of Monterey Bay area airports, limiting growth to that specified in each individual airport master plan, supporting the development of another airport or air training facility, or doing nothing, that is, allowing airport owners and airport users to formulate their own policies.

After evaluating these options, the consultants recommended the option that calls for limited growth. The AMBAG board adopted that recommendation.

The Santa Cruz Memorial Airport Association, which is seeking to establish another airport in northern Santa Cruz County, complains that the regional airport plan does not promote the idea of establishing an airport in north county. In a letter to AMBAG, the association's president, Charles D. Eldridge III, M.D., comments that under the plan, the improvements at the Watsonville airport would be made too slowly to handle the demand of growing airport use in Santa Cruz County.

Eldridge suggests that a full

airport or at least a "bounce strip", which serves as a training facility, be developed in north county, because it is difficult for many north county pilots to use the Watsonville airport.

"Even though Highway 1 connects Watsonville with Santa Cruz, much of the north county is handicapped by the region's two-lane road system," Eldridge wrote. "It is for this reason that a 'bounce strip' or more properly phrased, a new adequate airport that truly serves the region should be developed in the north Santa Cruz County area."

Eldridge mentions a long waiting list for hangar space at the Watsonville airport as evidence that further airport expansion is needed. Eldridge also supports the need for a control tower at the Watsonville airport. There is already enough traffic at that airport, he said, to warrant a control tower.