

City closer to approving airport plan

Proposal calls for \$13.5M in projects over next 20 years

Courports
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The Watsonville City Council is a step closer to approving a 20-year construction plan for the municipal airport.

The council listened to public comment on the plan's environmental report Tuesday and is poised to approve the overall plan when it meets Jan. 28.

While council members say they support the airport, some had questions about noise and the facility's proximity to yet-to-be-built Pajaro Valley High School.

Councilman Antonio Rivas, whose Third District covers the airport, said he was concerned about noise impacts when school is in session, the airport's finances and flight paths.

"A lot of residents in the Third District have those concerns," Rivas said.

He said he may plan a constituent meeting before the council takes up the issue again.

Supporters of the plan say some of the slated projects, like lengthening the runway and an upgraded landing system, will make the airport safer.

A study in the early 1990s by the Association of Monterey Bay Area Governments estimated the airport brings in \$19 million annually. Critics say that study was flawed. AMBAG is performing a study this year, said airport manager Don French.

"It will be even safer when we get these changes made," said Sam Bishop, president of TOTLCOM and a user of the airport in his business travels.

As usual, the plan had its critics who have long said the airport land could be put to better use and making plans amid an unstable state and national economy may not be prudent.

Jerry Thomas said there should be a cost-benefit analysis on the airport.

"This is a classic example of putting the cart before the horse," Thomas said.

"I recommend at least postponing action on this until the financial picture clears up."

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Supporters said the airport is an economic draw.

"We need to promote all the commerce we can bring to this area," resident Terri Cad-dell said.

"It will bring a lot of dollars into the economy."

Among the \$13.5 million in projects planned during the next 20 years:

- Extending the primary runway 800 feet. That would allow planes to carry heavier payloads and more passengers, but would not accommodate larger planes.

- Adding 100 hangars.

- Developing a business park on the west side of the airport.

- Upgrading the landing system.

Most of the money would come from federal aviation grants, officials said.

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