

Transportation Commission nixes plans for Wilder Ranch airport

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SANTA CRUZ — The County Transportation Commission has effectively nixed any plans for an airport on Wilder Ranch north of Santa Cruz.

On a 9-1 vote Thursday, commissioners rejected a proposal to study the site as a possible replacement for the now-defunct Sky Park airport, just outside the Scotts Valley city limits.

Commissioners, who consist of members from the Board of Supervisors, cities and public, cited environmental concerns and long-term financial problems as reasons for not approving an initial study of the Wilder Ranch proposal.

Sky Park, which was owned by the city of Santa Cruz, was closed Dec. 31, 1982, to the dismay of pilots in the north county area.

Since then, various pilots' groups have lobbied for another airport to serve the north county area.

Among those were the Santa Cruz Memorial Airport Association, whose member — Dr. Charles Eldridge — urged the commission to proceed with an initial study.

"We really...don't think there's another site that even comes close (to being adequate)," said Dr. Eldridge.

He pointed out that Watsonville Airport — the only airport in the county — doesn't adequately serve the needs of the north county pilots because of the weather conditions, its location, and its limited space.

Dr. Eldridge argued that Wilder Ranch offered a good location in that it isn't close to homes and therefore wouldn't pose a noise or safety problem.

He said that he had assurances from the federal government to finance 90 percent of the cost of the study. The other 10 percent would be ponied up by the airport group he represents.

"We have a golden opportunity now to proceed at no expenditure of public funds with a study of a north coast airport," said Richard Damon, a member of the city of Santa Cruz Airport Commission.

But even promises of money weren't strong enough to sway the commissioners.

Ron Marquez, staff member for the Transportation Commission, pointed out that the County Planning Department had raised "fairly strong" obstacles to the Wilder Ranch proposal.

Among them were that the airport

didn't conform with the General Plan or Local Coastal Plan.

The proposed site lies in the Baldwin Creek Watershed, which has been set aside for open space, recreational or residential uses.

Also, the area is under consideration as a place to build a reservoir to capture north coast waters.

Commissioner E. Wayne Moore Jr., who also is 4th district supervisor (Pajaro Valley), cast the lone vote that would have kept the airport study alive.

Moore said an airport along the north coast would help the tourist industry and could be very useful in cases of disasters.

"I think it's premature to say absolutely no," said Moore.

But as commissioner Mardi Wormhoudt, also a Santa Cruz City Councilwoman, said, "I reluctantly support the motion."

"It would be very irresponsible to support a study that it seems won't bear fruition," she said. "It seems there really are serious environmental concerns."

Those comments were echoed by com-

missioners Gary Patton, third district supervisor, and John Laird, mayor of Santa Cruz.

Laird went on to say he didn't think the city should be the lead agency in the search for a new airport along the north coast.

"That would just lead to what happened in the past," he said.