




Commissioners okay airport agreement

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Although the pending approval of a 381 agreement between the county and Jim Carpenter & Associates brought out a crowd, the air in the commissioners court room Monday morning was much calmer than the last time the airport developer and county residents met there in April 2009.

When county residents, especially those who live in the area of the proposed Central Texas Airport on the western end of the county, first heard about the CTA, they were anything but calm. And to some extent, those feelings have not abated. At that earlier town hall meeting, however, no-one got up and offered support for the project. At Monday's commissioners court meeting, several citizens and entities did.

"Elgin Independent School District is strongly in support of the proposed airport," said Bill Graves, superintendent. "It will make a big difference in our bonding ability. The growth will have a real positive impact."

Last year, residents were taken by surprise by the news of the proposed airport – and possibly an attached municipal utility district with powers of eminent domain – especially after Bluebonnet Electric Co-op CEO Mark Rose stood up and challenged Carpenter about a "super-MUD" listed in what appeared to be a legislative bill in the making. Carpenter has since said the document was a draft for "conversation purposes only."

Now, a year later, Carpenter has spent much of his time providing information to county residents and working closely with county officials to make his proposal more palatable.

"There was a lot of misinformation that was put out there," Carpenter said. "People had their minds made up before they even heard from us."

At Monday's meeting, the commissioners unanimously approved the 381 agreement.

381 agreement

Agreements such as the 381 are usually financial incentives like property tax abatements, payments of portions of sales tax generated by a project, loans or grants or financial commitments to infrastructure.

"A 381 is one of the very few tools that a county has in their toolbox to require anything (of a developer)," said Commissioner Clara Beckett, precinct 2. "Without a 381 agreement, the county would have virtually no say on what is developed on this property. Any taxes that are returned to him are paid by him originally. This is not subsidized by citizens' property taxes and not until a substantial asset is on the ground."

The 381 agreement approved on Monday contains provisions that both parties – the county and CTA – brought into ongoing negotiations. Included in the agreement is a prohibition against CTA ever becoming a commercial airport like Austin-Bergstrom Airport. Also included is the caveat that for CTA to realize its tax rebate, it must be current on all its taxes, such as property, road and bridge, school and ESD taxes. According to county engineer Ronnie Moore, the county will always realize the property tax it would have received if the land

remained unimproved – currently about \$3,300. Once the airport’s infrastructure is built and the land’s value improves, CTA will receive 75 percent of its property tax back for a period of 30 years. After that, the county will receive 100 percent of the property tax.

Carpenter said he will still ask the city of Bastrop, which has the property in their extra-territorial jurisdiction, to allow the airport to use an existing water district on the property. He pointed to the recent approval of planned subdivision XS Ranch on Texas 95, where the city approved five municipal utility districts.

“It’s only on our property,” he said. “The only people paying for this are the people on the property.”

Citizens speak

“I didn’t move out there to have jet planes taking off and landing over me,” said Marsha Carrera, a resident of the area.

Other residents said they weren’t going to come out for or against the project.

“I’m not going to say I am for or against the project,” said Ann Beck. “But since there have been compromises made by the CTA, could that be more public? Can Mr. Carpenter meet with the public and show us the new images?”

Darleen Lindell raised the question of drug trafficking. She pointed out that drug traffickers are increasingly using light aircraft to bring drugs into the United States and that I-35 is a preferred route.

Carpenter said it was one of the first things he considered when he started planning the airport project.

“We recognize the things that are a threat to us and to the community,” he said. “We will have that well covered. We are going to be sure we protect ourselves and the security of our clients.”

What’s next

Now that the 381 agreement has been approved, Carpenter said purchasing the land is next on his agenda.

“We’re going to move forward,” he said. “We’re going to go ahead and acquire the land.”

He said he is already assembling teams of airport construction experts, architects and engineers. He hopes to break ground before the end of 2010.

“There’s been a lot of hard work by the county commissioners and county judge,” he said. “Bastrop County is blessed to have commissioners and a county judge who are so concerned about their community. They have taken the time to understand this.”

Commissioner Lee Dildy said the decision to approve the agreement was not taken lightly.

“I can understand everyone’s concerns,” he said. “The court spent a lot of time on this. We have a deep, abiding concern for everything that was said here.”