

Airport plan grounded

by Janene Scully, Santa Maria (CA) Times

Sunday, September 14, 2003

After more than 15 years, at least \$1.5 million and multiple designs, Santa Maria Public Airport officials are poised to spend another \$436,000 to re-start the planning process for a business park and golf course.

It's the latest twist in a long journey to create the Santa Maria Research Park, an effort that has been filled with delays blamed on angry neighbors, rigid regulators and endangered species. And, officials say, it will be at least another 18 months to two years before the site south of airfield will be ready for construction.

That has left some airport officials doubting the process will ever end and questioning the wisdom of continuing. Thursday night, the Santa Maria Public Airport District Board of Directors unanimously approved hiring consultants for \$436,000 to revise the project's specific plan and create new environmental documents.

"We're at a point where we are ready to move forward," General Manager Gary Rice said, adding that the team of consultants involves various firms that worked "long and hard on this project over the years.

"We're at a point in time where we have to actually re-create the specific plan, tentative maps that have been processed, and deal with CEQA (California Environmental Quality Act)," he said.

Federally protected critters - the California tiger salamander leads the list - have caused the latest delay for the beleaguered development. Officials of the airport and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service last month ended months of negotiations to devise a compromise plan that allows the development to move forward while protecting the salamander. The compromise is only a new starting point, however, as the process requires further public hearing and possibly additional revisions.

"We're spending a heck of a lot of money, but we think the return to the community is going to be worth it," Rice said.

Over the years, residents have questioned why an airport, which is run by independent public agency, undertook this project. Former General Manager Dan Hoback launched the effort in the 1980s.

"The reason was, we were running out of land in the industrial park and it was time to start planning for what the airport should best do with surplus land and how it would best serve the community," Hoback said.

Director Jim Klucker answered more succinctly, "For income."

As predicted by Hoback and other officials, the airport did sell nearly all of its available land along Skyway Drive, Industrial Parkway and Fairway Drive east of the airfield. With that land gone, economic development officials trying to bring new industry to town say they have few places to put new businesses. Because, they say, the airport district holds the largest amount of land available for development, they are eagerly awaiting the new research park.

The district sold the land in the Skyway Industrial Park, but the new plan calls for leasing the land on the south side to provide a steady revenue stream to fuel the airport financially. And, despite taking on the role of developer, the airport district doesn't intend to actually build the facilities. Instead the land will be prepared so private developers can move in to construct buildings.

"I think you need to look at the asset the airport represents to the entire Santa Maria Valley, not just the city but the entire area," said Director Ted Eckert, adding that a "civic-minded" airport board has looked to the valley's economic development needs to balance jobs and housing.

"I've been told this is the area that the community is banking on to offer high-tech or higher paying jobs," Rice said. "I think it's mostly focused on creating higher paying jobs. From that point of view, higher paying jobs bring more travel."

Santa Maria officials have been frustrated through years of trying to bring in more airlines to provide larger planes and more routes.

The research park delays might actually serve as a blessing in disguise, according to Eckert, because the time might allow California to fix laws he considers "anti-business" and make it easier for the airport to recruit new companies.

In the beginning in the late 1980s, the research park plan included light industry, a golf course, a neighborhood shopping center and office complex. But the offices and shopping center drew fierce opposition from neighbors in the early 1990s. The Santa Barbara County Airport Land Use Commission also rejected the plan's heavy density and mix of uses, saying it would place too many people too close to runways.

In 1992, the county-wide panel approved the concept without the offices and shopping center. Still, the plan met opposition from city officials. A compromise plan seemed to solve the problem, until the Federal Aviation Administration shot it down in 1993, citing concerns about proximity to runways and errant golf balls. After a pause, the airport district revived the project with a new design that intermingles light industry and a golf course.

In 1995, when the Santa Maria City Council gave its blessings, the last hurdles seemingly had been cleared. A specific plan, later revised, and environmental documents several inches thick brought the price tag for planning to \$851,053 by

1995, airport officials said. Philosophical differences along the way led to varying opinions about the role of the golf course.

According to regulations, two abandoned landfills in the area also had to be made safe before construction could begin. And district officials had to decide what to do with a mobile home park that sits in the midst of the project area, on land the airport already owns. Strategies for relocating tenants have been discussed but not made final.

By 2000, the project was months away from breaking ground when an environmental survey brought plans to another screeching halt. An endangered species, the California tiger salamander, lives on the land and federal biologists said the project would harm the tiny creature.

After a months of negotiations, Fish and Wildlife Service officials and the airport came to a verbal agreement in August. But the specific plan must be changed again to accommodate the compromise. With the newest consultants, the project's price tag will climb to nearly \$2 million for plans and reports, but no buildings.

"If somebody would have told me that 13 years ago, I would have said that is preposterous," Eckert said. Director Jim Klucker expressed doubts that environmental hurdles have been cleared.

"In my mind that is not resolved yet," Klucker said. "These people are going to come back with more demands. It's just going to go on and on and on ... It gets to a point where it get ridiculous."

Asked if he has considered canceling the project, "I'm certainly leaning that way to pull the plug," he added.