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Runway talks put Mather Airport's draft master plan on hold

By Molly Dugan -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published December 14, 2003*)

The Sacramento County Board of Supervisors has delayed a decision on the draft master plan for Mather Airport to allow more time to discuss the length of a controversial runway extension.

The 6,040-foot runway, north of the main landing strip, is too short for air cargo planes and is used only for general aviation. The county wants to expand it to 7,200 feet with an option to increase it to 8,500 feet later.

Supervisors agreed in August to include the runway expansion in the draft master plan. In a hearing Tuesday, however, a board majority wasn't convinced that the option for 8,500 feet is needed in the final version of the master plan.

Several residents of Folsom, Rancho Cordova and El Dorado Hills lobbied the board to keep the runway expansion out of the final plan at least until existing noise and air pollution problems are solved.

"To go forward with this airport (plan) without dealing with existing issues is not responsible," said Carmine Forcina, who lives south of Mather Airport.

Board members debated whether to approve the draft master plan and study the 8,500-foot option later in the process or to hold off until they make a decision about the runway length.

Supervisors Roger Niello and Don Nottoli favored delaying a decision, while Roger Dickinson and Muriel Johnson opposed waiting. With Supervisor Illa Collin absent, the split board agreed to delay action on the draft master plan to Feb. 17.

The expansion would allow cargo planes enough room to land on the north runway. The second runway is intended to be a backup in case the main landing strip is not available because of maintenance or an accident, county officials said.

Critics of the expansion said the backup runway is simply a ruse to create more cargo capacity at the airport, especially if the supervisors allow it to be as long as 8,500 feet. More cargo flights means more noise and air pollution, they said.

"There is a hidden agenda," Rosemont resident Michael Gallagher said. "There is no justification as a backup runway for 8,500 feet."

Rob Leonard, assistant director of the Sacramento County Airport System, said 7,200 feet is the minimum length for a backup runway to accommodate cargo planes.

But some cargo planes in the future may need as much as 8,500 feet, he said, which is why the county is asking for the option for further expansion.

Leonard said a backup runway won't increase cargo plane traffic at the airport. There are currently about 10

flights per day, and officials estimate the number will peak in 10 years at 24 flights per day.

The cost to expand the runway to 7,200 feet is \$14.7 million and \$34.2 million to 8,500 feet.

Once the draft master plan is approved, the county will conduct an environmental analysis to look at ways to reduce noise and air pollution. A final master plan is expected to go to the board for consideration in about a year.

The city of Folsom and El Dorado County have expressed concerns about the expansion because of noise and air pollution from the cargo planes. Rancho Cordova officials support Mather Airport expansion, saying it would contribute to the economic vitality of the community.

About the Writer

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