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Reader's Watchdog: Residents wonder: Does Pella area need a new airport?

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A sign near Pella protests a proposed regional airport. / Lee Rood/The Register



Written by Lee Rood

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PELLA, IA. — Drive Iowa Highway 163 into Pella, meander through the neighborhoods, around the picture-perfect town square. Trust me, you won't find a sign praising a proposed regional airport here.

All the signs you do pass say things like: "Foolish Spending! Your taxes Up Up Up."

If you listen to Donna and Alvin Potratz, you understand better why

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lots of regular folks are feeling the need to stick their sentiments in the ground, on a window or the side of a truck. The Potratzes, a retired psychiatric nurse and truck driver, say droves of residents believe city officials are largely ignoring them to satisfy local employers, like Pella Windows and Vermeer Corp.

The companies are using larger jets, and they need a longer runway for safety reasons. Pella already serves between 300 and 500 of the larger jet flights per year, so the Federal Aviation Administration has agreed it's time for the city to upgrade to accommodate current and future air traffic.

To businesses, nearby access is important: Iowa companies rank proximity to commercial and general aviation airports among their top 10 factors when selecting a new location, according to Pella's Area Development Corp.

But the area already has two regional airports within about a half-hour's drive — in Ottumwa and Newton — in addition to the Des Moines airport, located about 50 miles from Pella. The Potratzes are among those who believe taxpayers don't need to pay for a new South Central Regional Airport just so executives can shave 15 or 20 minutes off their drive time.

"The mayor has said this won't affect our taxes, but they've already gone up twice since 2010," Donna Potratz told me as she sat in her tidy living room two blocks off the square.

Iowa currently has 101 general aviation airports, according to the Iowa Department of Transportation. At least 78 of those are subsidized by the federal government. Fifteen are considered enhanced airports, meaning they have the services, infrastructure and longer runways needed to accommodate bigger jet traffic.

I asked Michelle McEnany, head of the state transportation department's office of aviation, if anyone had studied whether Iowa already had more regional airports compared to other states. She said she did not believe so. While the FAA has pushed states to consolidate, determining need is largely a local decision.

The biggest hurdle to the airport proposed between Pella and Oskaloosa is "definitely the locals and the landowners," McEnany said.

No evidence taxes will really go up

The city of Pella's problem is that it cannot expand its existing airport runway — doing so would extend it onto Iowa Highway 163. So Pella forged an agreement with Oskaloosa and Mahaska County to form an independent agency to shutter the two cities' current airports and build the South Central Regional Airport in between.

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Business groups like the Pella Area Development Corp. say there will be efficiencies, and they note local manufacturers provide more than 60 percent of all household income in Marion County.

The Potratzes moved to Iowa from Arizona in 2010 to be nearer family, and they live on a fixed income, so any creep in taxes is important.

They say signs opposing the airport are all over town. A petition is circulating. Websites like noregionalairport.com have been created. Intensifying the backlash is the fact that eminent domain could be used to take farmers' land to build the airport at one of three sites between Pella and Oskaloosa.

They believe there is enough division in town that the matter should go to a vote.

Their question to the Des Moines Register Reader's Watchdog: Why can't there be one?

For one thing, Iowa law allows local governments to create independent entities that aren't directly accountable to taxpayers. The South Central Regional Airport Agency was formed under a frequently used legal contract between jurisdictions — it's called a 28E agreement.

The agency has been charged to usher the evaluation, construction and operations of a regional airport.

Pella city administrator Mike Nardini downplayed how far along the planning was and said the agency is still researching options and alternatives.

Studies that will take place over the next two years will determine if there is a need for an airport, he said. After a site is chosen, an environmental study must be completed.

"Once the studies are done, that's when the FAA will decide," Nardini said.

Nardini confirmed, however, that three sites already have been identified between Pella and Oskaloosa. He said eminent domain would only be considered as a last resort. He also said alternatives to new construction are still being evaluated.

Residents do not get to vote on the issue because the airport agency has no taxing authority, he said. Neither Pella nor Oskaloosa is planning to issue debt, which would have created another opportunity for a referendum, he said.

Instead, both cities plan to finance their portion of the cost of the

new airport of the project by selling off existing airport land.

Residents will have the opportunity to voice their opinions at a public meeting, which has yet to be set.

Under current plans, it is unlikely construction of the airport would increase local taxes.

Could other airports handle the jets?

Dave Swenson, who does economic-development research at Iowa State University, said he does not believe it makes sense to spend public dollars on the South Central Regional Airport project.

For one thing, the airport only would aid “a tiny fraction” of the local community, Swenson said. Also, the biggest deterrent to business growth in the area is maintaining a high-quality workforce, not the length of time executives drive to the airport, he said.

Sometimes, these projects never take flight. Businesses argued for years that a regional airport was needed in fast-growing Dallas County, but there was never one built.

For now, it looks like the FAA — not taxpayers in the region — will decide whether the project moves forward.

But the Potratzes are right about one thing: The area does appear to have other options.

Bob Knabel, city administrator in Newton, said the airport there has the capacity to take on the traffic; the only question is the drive.

Tom Francis, Ottumwa's regional airport superintendent, said his larger airport, a former Navy base built in the 1940s that is 36 miles from Pella's existing airport, could also handle the extra business. That airport is open 24 hours per day.

Still, Francis said, he did not have an opinion on what Pella and Oskaloosa should do.

“We have a lot of corporate traffic. John Deere, Cargill, Menards,” Francis said. “We’re busy. But not busy enough to say we’re maxed out.”

Lee Rood's Reader's Watchdog column helps Iowans get answers and accountability. Contact her at lrood@dmreg.com or by calling 515-284-8549. Read past reports at DesMoinesRegister.com/ReadersWatchdog.

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