

Board Tables Airport Plan Opposition fears FAA control

BY COLLEEN REYNOLDS

A five-year capital improvement plan calling for \$10.45 million in projects at East Hampton Airport drew a full house to Town Hall last Thursday, November 21, with proponents urging its passage for safety purposes, and opponents panning it as unnecessary and a step toward expansion and more noise and pollution.

The Town Board, following a two-hour public hearing filled with comments from more than two dozen people, ultimately pushed the plan off to a future work session for more discussion.

Underlying the debate was a concern among opponents that approving the plan would pave the way toward extending Federal Aviation Association grant assurances that are set to expire at the end of 2014, which some say could limit local control of the facility. Others, such as Councilwoman Theresa Quigley, said that tying it to FAA funding was a "red herring," as approving the plan would be a first step toward the FAA funding path, but would not mean that is the route the town would follow. The tabled resolution states only that the plan sets forth projects that the town may elect to pursue.

Only one major capital project—rehabilitation of the main runway and taxiway in 2007—has been completed during his nine years managing the airport, Airport Manager Jim Brundige told the board. Despite small interim repairs over the years, the

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main infrastructure has continued to deteriorate: pavement is crumbling, taxi lighting is failing, and trees are obstructing paths, he said.

"This facility requires capital improvements," he said, "Otherwise, I'm concerned the airport could close out of neglect."

The plan is a "living document," one that could be changed over time, he added.

Dennis Yap, the president and owner of DY Consultants, a firm hired by the town and that prepared the plan, prefaced the hearing by listing some past projects at the airport. Much of that work, he said, has passed its shelf life.

Runway 4-22, for example, has been closed because of its poor condition, which includes a type of stress-related cracking that is structurally unsound for aircraft.

The proposed capital plan, he said, focuses on existing pavement, not additional pavement. With higher priority items listed first, the plan calls for \$2.16 million of work in 2014, including temporarily rehabilitating Runway 4-22. Full rehabilitation for that runway is listed among \$2.43 million of work laid out for 2017.

Pilots and other airport proponents took to the lectern to highlight the need for maintenance

as a critical safety measure. They spoke of the vital role the airport plays in their livelihoods. One described a freshly severed, bloody deer head at the airport, a recent decapitation that he said resulted from the safety hazard posed by fencing gaps.

Opponents comments were punctuated by those who claimed the public did not have enough information to comment intelligently on the plan, given its late introduction, lack of detail and questions about whether each proposed element would receive the appropriate environmental review.

Councilman Dominick Stanzone, the town's airport liaison, said that as stewards of the facility, the town has a responsibility to address its investment needs. In the end, he acquiesced to Councilwoman Sylvia Overby's request to shelve the plan for further discussion, but in a subsequent interview, he took issue with how more than a decade has passed without a hearing on airport capital improvements.

"What if we didn't have a plan to improve our roads?" he said. "... What if we decided we're just going to let them deteriorate?" In response to public complaints of noise and pollution, he facetiously suggested the town rid itself of trains, which, he pointed out, are noisy and polluting.

Some opponents criticized the plan over departures from a previous airport layout plan and master plan, but Mr. Stanzone said later that the plans only have to be "generally consistent," not a perfect match. He declined to comment on a recent memo issued to the town from its airport counsel, Kaplan, Kirsch & Rockwell, calling it confidential under attorney-client privilege. That memo, discussed briefly by the board during a public portion of a work session last week, describes a "significant shift" in FAA policy away from its historical stance that citizens' noise complaints are an unscientific way to establish a noise problem.

Ms. Overby called the memo very significant. She said the FAA will soon reclassify helicopters, rendering irrelevant the town's work to date on noise abatement.

Kathleen Cunningham, the chairwoman of the Quiet Skies Coalition, meanwhile, issued a statement this week accusing the Town Board of secretly negotiating with the East Hampton Aviation Association to sign a contract with the FAA before a new administration takes office in January. Board members denied these accusations.

"It sure smells like bad cheese to me," Ms. Cunningham said in her statement.