

BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
FOR SOMERSET COUNTY
MARCH 17, 2011

At 2:00 pm, in the Meeting Room of the County Commissioners Office, Commissioner President Rex Simpkins brought the room to order and welcomed those in attendance for an informal open meeting about the Crisfield-Somerset County Airport Land Acquisition and Obstruction Removal Program. Also in attendance: Commissioner Jerry Boston, Commissioner Randy Laird, County Administrator Cynthia Ward, City of Crisfield representative Joyce Morgan, MAA representative (Ashish Solanki) and representatives from URS Corporation, Jennifer Lutz, (Project Manager) and Ken Brazeau, Airport Planner.

Mrs. Ward began by stating that the meeting was held to address the concerns and questions regarding the Program and representatives from URS were present to provide a description of the project, status, next steps in the process, and to answer any questions the Commissioners and residents might have.

Ms. Lutz offered a short PowerPoint presentation and instructional video to provide basic information about the project and handouts of the presentation were provided. Visual aids of the projected areas affected were also available. The meeting was then open to questions from the room.

Questions addressed were the following:

A request was made for supporting documentation of the requirements be made available to the public. Commissioner President Simpkins asked that URS provide the information to the Commissioner's Office and they would in turn make it available.

How many airports in the country is URS currently working with?

Ms. Lutz stated that she could only speak to their particular office, but they have handled similar projects with Cambridge Airport, Easton Airport, the Bay Bridge, and Frederick Airport among others.

Mr. Solanki stated that it was important to take into consideration that the Federal Government doesn't fund projects unless they are considered critical. Of the 19,000 or so landing facilities in the US, only about 5,000 qualified for FAA grant money. Crisfield-Somerset County Airport falls into the group that is eligible for those grants, but in order to continue to be eligible the airport has the obligation to meet minimum national standards.

Where is information on the standards and how was it established?

The most up to date information on the Federal standards for airports can most likely be found on the FAA website at www.faa.gov.

What would happen if we don't maintain minimum standards?

While the FAA is flexible in their approach, the worst case scenario would be having to pay back funding that has been accepted in the past. Penalties from non-compliance would be at the discretion of the enforcing regulator.

The airport hasn't had a problem before, why now?

FAA rules and requirements have changed over time and the minimum standards have changed as a part of the growth process.

How was the designated area chosen?

The area was surveyed air initially then it was further refined by onsite visits. The formula for figuring out what presented an obstruction is 7:1 ratio (for every seven feet from the edge of the runway, you go up one foot).

Does the airport qualify for a waiver on this issue or can the existing standards be grandfathered in?

While waivers do exist, there is a very slim chance that one would be granted. The FAA may grant more time toward a project, but ultimately needs the airport to meet minimum standards.

Is there an option between removal and trimming?

There is the possibility of crown reduction, but 25% of the tree must remain and they would have to assess what the area would look like after it was done. If crown reduction is a viable option, once the trees were cut it maintenance would be the responsibility of the sponsor (the City and the County).

Would the program offer replacement of trees if the foliage didn't interfere with minimum standards?

The program will not offer replacement unless required by environmental concerns addressed with the permit. The issue will be addressed in the design phase.

Homeowners in the area affected are required, by environmental regulations, to use natural means to retain the shoreline and many of the trees within the affected area are there for that purpose. A major concern was the FAA requiring the removal of trees that are being used as a natural erosion barrier and the homeowners caught in the middle. Ms. Lutz stated that any environmental concerns would be addressed during the permitting process. All government stakeholders would be brought in to assess what needed to happen so that all sides would be agreeable to any action taken and the project

would be contingent on the proper permits being issued. When the process first began, the stakeholders were made aware of the project.

Mr. Solanki stated that if there was a gap between FAA and the environmental standards there may be a more flexible state funding mechanism to help meet requirements.

Would it be fair to assume MAA funding would not be tied to the requirement issued by the FAA?

Funds may be available based on the project as a whole.

If the project was a no go, and the City and County lose the link to funding from the FAA, would we also lose the funding from MAA?

While state funding would still be available, the airport would still be subject to state regulations and compliance with state public use facility regulations.

Would the tree removal be selective or clear cut?

They will have to take a look at the individual properties to assess how to proceed. If there are a large amount of trees that would need to be removed, they would favor a clear cut. If there are only a few trees on the property that fell into that category, they would do a selective cut based on height and growth potential.

Mr. Solanki stated that the project wouldn't try to take on more work than was necessary to get the job done, but stressed that planning ahead would mitigate the chance of the issue arising again.

Have the trees affected been identified?

No. The design process will identify the trees that need to be removed.

Does the FAA fund the cost of routine operations at the airport?

Funds are available only for capital improvement projects and that the City of Crisfield and Somerset County fund the airport operations. The MAA does provide an equipment loan program where they buy the equipment and place it on loan to the airport. This is separate from any capital improvement projects.

Beyond the URS contract for the tree project, has the county identified any projects in the coming years that FAA funding can be used for?

Though there weren't currently any projects in the works that required FAA funding, the airport master plan would identify a checklist of things that will need to be done to the airport and minimum standards would need to be met before FAA funding could be requested for future projects.

If getting federal grant money is the driving force behind the project and we don't have any additional projects currently in the works, can the project wait?

It would be the decision of the sponsor (City and County) whether to request a delay for the project, but several concerns arise if that happens. Minimum standards will still need to be met regardless of the time it takes. When the project is taken "off the shelf" all of the assessments and studies will need to be brought up to date. The FAA only pays for that work to be done once and it will become the sponsor's responsibility to pay for all of the work to be redone up to the point that it was completed when it was put on hold. Restarting the project from this point would be cost prohibitive.

If the project is delayed, will the FAA close the airport?

It may be a possibility, but the general thought is that this would not be the case. They would highly encourage the site be brought into compliance though.

What started the process?

The process started as a review of safety issues. It began several years ago, has slowly moved forward.

When will they review the site again or revisit the issues?

Airports are assessed each year. When an issue is found, it is brought to the attention of the sponsor.

If the landowners say no to the whole project, would the FAA begin the process of condemnation?

The process of condemnation would have to begin with the sponsor. After the process is started there would be eligibility for Federal Uniform Relocation Act Funding. If condemnation is not started the airport would continue to be in violation of FAA standards and not eligible for grant monies to improve the airport.

Easement is not a popular option with the landowners. Can a property owner allow access to the property without having to sell an easement?

It is possible to allow for an access and removal, but the easement is best in the long term interest of the airport. If an access and removal is performed and the tree grows back and becomes an issue again, it would fall to the sponsor to enforce the height restriction in order to meet minimum safety standards. With an easement, it gives the sponsor sufficient land use power for protection of the airport and current and future homeowners would be bound to maintain the height of foliage below a specified level. URS can work with the FAA and property owners on a case by case basis once it is determined how to proceed.

Where is the project in the process and what is the next step?

The project is currently undergoing a review of the appraisals for fair market value of easements and how it would affect the future and is in the second round of providing supplemental information. After that the next step is negotiation with property owners.

Mr. Pehan submitted a letter by one of the landowners who could not be present due to the short notice and timing of the meeting. He requested that the Commissioners consider having a follow-up meeting at a later time so that business owners and others who could not make an afternoon meeting would be able to attend. He also requested a list of action items for follow-up.

Mr. Kuebler suggested that the FAA be invited for an onsite visit. He also stated that the meeting had been very helpful in providing information and resolving problems.

Mr. Riggin invited the Commissioners to Annemessex Ridge for an on the ground perspective. Commissioner President Simpkins stated that that would probably best be done after the trees are marked for removal.

The informal meeting ended at 3:53 pm.

Respectfully Submitted:


Wendy Robertson

Approved By:


Board of County Commissioners
For Somerset County

Wendy Robertson Select
100% COTTON RECYCLED