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News

Lost Nation Airport study ready to take flight

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With a major funding hurdle now cleared, the long-awaited Lake County Port Authority study of Lost Nation Municipal Airport is finally set to take off.

Though it's been about three years since Lake County commissioners first expressed interest in purchasing the airport from the city of Willoughby, Port Authority Executive Director John Loftus expects the study — which aims to examine several scenarios surrounding the airport — to start this week.

"We're going to start moving, start collecting and getting all the data together," he said. "We've been working on (arranging the study) for more than a year now, and it's obviously been a critical issue for us to get this thing moving."

Why the delay? In part because the Port Authority thought it was best to wait until the Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency could free up some funding, which it voted to do on Aug. 14. NOACA will grant the Port Authority \$35,000 to help fund the study, which as it stands will be conducted in two phases and cost a total of about \$100,000.

"Until (NOACA) actually approved this action, the advice was, 'Don't do anything,' " Loftus said. "If it was perceived we were moving forward without their support, it might give someone an opportunity to say, 'They don't need that money.' "

On behalf of the Port Authority, the Lake County Planning Commission has applied to the Cleveland Foundation's Lake-Geauga Fund for a \$25,000 grant. Loftus said he thinks they'll learn the fate of that application later this month. Add to that another \$10,000 the Port Authority has in its coffers and the agency will have lined up \$70,000 of the study's total cost if the Lake-Geauga grant is approved.

"We'll keep working with the county to locate the remaining funds," he said.

As for the study itself, the first phase is expected to take three to four months to complete, said Loftus, explaining that the company conducting the study, Cleveland-based Michael Baker Corp., will gather facts, statistics and information related to Lost Nation with a number of different scenarios surrounding the airport's future in mind.

As outlined by Loftus, those options include allowing Lost Nation to continue operating as it is now, shutting down the airport and using the land to create a light industrial park, expanding the airport within its existing footprint, or moving operations to the eastern end of the county and having Lost Nation function as a regional airport serving Lake, Geauga and Ashtabula counties.

"We'll be getting input from the (Federal Aviation Administration) because they're going to have a big say in what happens with this," he said. "If by shutting down Lost Nation you end up creating bottlenecks and other problems at some of the other regional airports, is the FAA going to look at that and say that's OK or say that's going to cause too many problems?"

"That's one of the reasons NOACA agreed to be a funding agent to this — because what happens at Lost Nation will impact the entire region," Loftus said. "It will impact that entire airport infrastructure of Northeast Ohio."

The economic ramifications of what happens to the airport also will be a key part of the study.

"Most airports require some form of subsidy, especially general aviation airports," he said. "When you look at an airport and realize there's this huge concentration of jobs, the public subsidy is easily justified because of the economic impact generated by the airport."

Loftus said this analysis will look at jobs and what impact it has on the local community, and does that justify public support — whether it's local or federal.

"We have to have a good, objective analysis of that impact so that when decisions are made, they're being made with the best information available," he said.

Loftus said he thinks Baker's team will provide the Port Authority and community members with exactly that kind of analysis.

"What's important is looking at the makeup of the team that's doing the work. A lot of times, these studies are done by airport consultants," Loftus said, explaining that he specifically required that firms applying to conduct the Lost Nation study include an economic impact element in their proposals.

Various meetings also will take place as part of the study's first phase, said Loftus, adding that they'd likely take place sometime this fall.

"We'll do some stakeholder meetings with all the different tenants as well as the groups that are opposed. We'll gather information, thoughts and ideas," he said.

"We'll also have a public meeting, where the general public will be invited to hear the basic facts about the airport and what's going on in the industry."

The second phase of the study will involve compiling all the information gathered as well as all the feedback from those meetings into a series of recommendations for the county to make a decision on what action to take, Loftus said.

Despite the recent downturn in the economy, Loftus said he doesn't believe the commissioners have wavered in their interest in the airport — pending the results of the study.

Loftus noted that from the beginning the commissioners' have intended to apply for federal funding to defray the cost should they decide to purchase the airport.

As for Willoughby's involvement, Mayor David Anderson said the city is waiting on the results of the airport study just like everyone else.

In 1996, the city took its last Airport Improvement Program grant from the FAA.

Attached to each accepted grant was the stipulation that the city continues to operate the airport for another 20 years.

"In 2016, there will be no stipulations," Anderson said. "It will give (city) council some options."

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