

Mayor would love to land airport-panel seat



JACK CAVANAGH: He says he can help.

■ Cavanagh says city needs to be represented on board

By Susan E. White
JOURNAL REPORTER

Being a member of the Forsyth County Airport Commission may not sound like a plum assignment, but Mayor Jack Cavanagh is making a heavy push to get on the board.

The five-member commission, which oversees Smith Reynolds Airport, has traditionally been a county board because the county owns the airport. But since Winston-Salem began

developing the Liberty Street corridor airport, Cavanagh has lobbied for a position seat with dogged determination.

"He's been asking about it for as long as I can remember," said Peter Brunstie, chairman of the Forsyth County commissioners. The commissioners appointed Cavanagh to the airport commission.

Though Cavanagh has been invited to the commission's monthly meetings, a quest for membership has been turned down primarily because the state legislature has to change the commission's charter to allow a city official to sit on the board.

Commissioner Gloria Whisenhunt. "I know this may sound simple, but you know, if it ain't broke, don't fix it," said Whisenhunt, who also sits on the airport commission.

"We just don't see the need to change," Cavanagh says that Smith Reynolds is central to the city's economic development, and a Winston-Salem official should be allowed to serve on the airport's board.

"I happen to think that the airport is an incredible jewel to the community and an expensive resource that we need to emphasize," Cavanagh said.

"All I want to do is to try to work together so

we can have the best possible program for that airport that we possibly can."

Cavanagh has not asked that the charter be changed.

Cavanagh and other city officials say that the development of an Airport Business Park is the heart of the Liberty Street corridor. Late last year, the city received \$3 million from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development to build the park, which will cover about 40 acres along Fairchild Road, just south of the airport.

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The money will help the city buy and clear property for the business park, which will focus on airplane- and technology-related businesses. City officials also hope that the HUD dollars will help Winston-Salem recruit up to 12 new businesses to the office park. HUD officials have said that the project could eventually generate up to 1,100 jobs and an investment of \$13.2 million in buildings.

Cavanagh has suggested that his membership on the airport commission could possibly help the city secure additional federal money. "I just know that sometimes things like that help," he said.

John Swanson, a public-affairs officer with HUD, said that the agency awards money based on "need and justification," not personalities. Commission members deny any underlying

personal reasons for precluding Cavanagh as a possible member. Still, Keith Comer, the commission's vice chairman, said that there has been some concern over the city's unwillingness to invest in the airport.

Winston-Salem and Forsyth County collect about \$1 million each year in property taxes from businesses at Smith Reynolds and from private aircraft stored there. The county has been the only one to reinvest that tax money in the airport, Comer said. Several years ago, the airport commission talked to city officials, including then-Mayor Martha Wood, about spending at the airport.

"But the city was blunt that it needed revenue from the airport and it had no intention of reinvesting in the airport," Comer said. "Obviously, it's very frustrating when the airport provides (tax) revenue to the city, and the city gets all the benefit, and none of that is reciprocated."

Because of the combined city and county taxes, Comer said he believes that aircraft owners are bypassing Smith Reynolds and instead

storing their aircraft at Twin Lakes Aviation in Davie County or at Piedmont Trad International Airport outside Greensboro.

"It just puts us at a competitive disadvantage," he said.

City officials say that development near Smith Reynolds will directly benefit the airport. But it's unlikely that city aldermen will spend any money there, said Allen Jones, the deputy city manager.

"Over the years, the city and the county have gotten fairly clear on whose responsibility the various agencies are within the county, and the county has taken the airport as it's thing," he said.

Even so, the airport commission is a public board and Cavanagh can still provide input at its meetings, said Bill Whiteheart, the commission chairman.

"Smith Reynolds Airport is very, very important to the area . . . and we welcome Jack Cavanagh. We welcome his ideas, and we welcome his input," Whiteheart said.