

Airport asks to shoot deer

Gun ordinance stands in way

By Bertrand M. Gutierrez
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Airport officials are asking the city of Winston-Salem for permission to use shotguns to hunt deer at Smith Reynolds Airport, citing the risk of a collision between deer and aircraft and the ineffectiveness of other mitigation efforts.

Chris Veal, the airport's interim director, told city officials recently that the deer population at the airport has increased to about 20. A fence surrounds much of the 600-acre property, but at 8 feet in height, the fence seems to corral deer on the property rather than keep them out, he said.

Building a higher fence, to 10 feet, would cost about \$500,000, Veal said.

Meanwhile, state wildlife officials have been bowhunting the deer, but that method has been ineffective. To prevent a possible collision between deer and aircraft, Veal asked the public-safety committee of the Winston-Salem City Council to amend a local ordinance that prohibits the discharge of firearms in the city.

Veal's request would allow state wildlife offi-

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cial to use shotguns to kill deer at the airport.

"It's not just a problem at Smith Reynolds. It's a problem with airports nationwide," Bill Whiteheart, the chairman of the Airport Commission of Forsyth County, said Thursday in a telephone interview.

Deer have adapted to urbanization by migrating to airports — wildlife oases where they often find food and shelter, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. As a result, airports in the U.S. have experienced problems with wildlife.

From 1990 to 2004, the aviation administration got 616 reports of an aircraft striking a white-tailed deer, with the cost of those incidents running more than \$22 million. Overall, 59,196 collisions with animals have occurred during the period, with

damage estimated at \$214 million.

In North Carolina, cities such as Greensboro and Charlotte allow the use of shotguns at airports as part of a wildlife-mitigation program, said Lee Garrity, a Winston-Salem assistant city manager.

But eliminating deer can be more complex than simply pulling a trigger.

Because the airport is bordered by residential neighborhoods — North Liberty Street, Bowen Boulevard, Carver School Road and several side streets — city officials have found themselves balancing the safety of residents, the burden that shotgun blasts might pose on quiet neighborhoods and the humane treatment of animals.

Responding to Council Member Nelson Malloy, a member of the public-safety committee, Veal said that the deer meat could be donated to the Second Harvest Food Bank.

Council Member Wanda Merschel, who said she was inclined to vote against the use of firearms, raised questions about safety and noise and asked what time of day the hunting would occur. Veal explained that hours would be limited to a narrow period at dawn and at dusk.

The public-safety committee put off a vote on the request, asking Veal to talk with residents near the airport, including members of the Castle Heights Neighborhood Association.

Whiteheart, meanwhile, underscored the risk that deer pose at airports.

"If the number is one, the number is too high. Whether it's one deer or 50 deer, that kind of conversation is similar to someone arguing what the size of the iceberg was that sank the Titanic," he said.

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