

Board debates airport relief

De-annexation or fee exemptions considered for Smith Reynolds

BY MEGHANN EVANS
Winston-Salem Journal

Forsyth County administrators are preparing resolutions for county commissioners to consider in their ongoing discussion about whether to ask state legislators to de-annex Smith Reynolds Airport from the city of Winston-Salem.

A majority of commissioners appeared to be in agreement Thursday that the airport needs some relief from city fees or taxes. The resolutions would give them a few routes to consider.

The commissioners could consider a resolution asking the Winston-Salem City Council to take action on a request that has been in council committee for several months: to exempt airport runways and taxiways from stormwater runoff fees.

Or, commissioners could ask state legislators to de-annex the airport. If de-annexation occurred, the Airport Commission of Forsyth County would no longer have to pay city stormwater

BOARD, Page A3

Board From Page A1

fees, and aircraft would no longer be subject to city personal-property taxes.

The Airport Commission, an independent unit of the county which operates Smith Reynolds, voted March 23 to explore de-annexation. Mark Davidson, the airport's director, took that recommendation to commissioners.

County Commissioner Ted Kaplan, who also sits on the Airport Commission, raised the de-annexation idea at county commissioner meetings a year ago. He said that Smith Reynolds is at a competitive disadvantage with other airports, because aircraft are subject to both city and county taxes. The city collects about \$294,000 in personal-property taxes from airport tenants each year, according to documents from the Airport Commission.

Commissioners will continue the discussion at

Thursday's commissioners briefing.

Last Thursday's commissioner briefing included a lengthy discussion that featured everything from a primer on stormwater fees to talk of city-county relations. Some commissioners criticized city officials for not already acting on the airport's request for a stormwater fee reduction.

The Airport Commission asked the Winston-Salem City Council to exempt airport runways and taxiways from the stormwater fee, saying they are public thoroughfares, but the request has been in committee since last fall and has not made it to the full council. According to the Airport Commission, the city collects about \$118,000 in stormwater fees from the Airport Commission, which is equivalent to about 20 percent of the airport's annual net income.

Kaplan said he does not understand the problem they are having with the city regarding stormwater

fees. He said the county

to city officials. Plyler said they can work together to solve this.

On Thursday, Turner gave commissioners an overview of the city's stormwater management program and answered questions about how the city uses stormwater fees. The fees help pay for efforts to manage stormwater — the rain that runs off property and ultimately to nearby streams and rivers, picking up pollutants along the way.

Witherspoon said the city should be giving the airport \$118,000, not taking it away. He said the airport is an economic engine creating jobs in eastern Winston-Salem.

"We hear all about economic development in East Winston. We need to look after our area. And then you have a business over there, about the only thing going in that particular area, and you're taking 20 percent of its income, Witherspoon said, calling it ridiculous.

Chairman Dave Plyler said there is a need to expand the line of communication between city hall and the county government center on this issue, which he told Assistant City Manager Greg Turner to relay

Commissioner Walter Marshall, who lives near the airport, expressed concerns March 24 about the request to reduce stormwater fees and wanted to make sure that any changes would not have a negative effect on the environment. Marshall said he thinks the city and county can work together to provide some financial assistance to the airport without pursuing de-annexation.

"The city recognizes the strong economic impact of Smith Reynolds Airport," City Manager Lee Garrity wrote in an email Friday. "I believe the city will be looking at options to partner with the county to increase economic development efforts related to the airport. I would expect to see serious discussion at upcoming city council meetings."

mevans@wsjournal.com
(336) 727-7204
@mevansWSJ