

County, legislators to discuss airport

Talks could include de-annexation of Smith Reynolds

BY MEGHANN EVANS
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Forsyth County commissioners meet with the county's state legislators next Thursday, a prime setting for continuing discussions about Smith Reynolds Airport, as well as city stormwater fees.

Forsyth County commissioners have discussed whether to ask legislators to de-annex Smith

Reynolds from the city of Winston-Salem, part of a larger discussion about how to make the airport more competitive and about city stormwater fees.

Commissioners are scheduled to meet with the county's legislative delegation at 11 a.m. Thursday, an annual meeting that provides commissioners and legislators an opportunity to talk about local concerns and possible legislation or initiatives.

As of Thursday, the list of proposed local initiatives that could be up for discussion included "Support through public policy initiatives the Smith-Reynolds

Airport as an economic development asset" and "Exempt local governments from stormwater fees imposed by local municipalities," plus a few unrelated items.

When asked what support through public policy initiatives meant, County Manager Dudley Watts said that could be de-annexation, creation of an enterprise zone around the airport, or some other method that seeks to put the airport at a competitive advantage.

The issue continues to evolve, and discussion will continue Thursday.

Also, Chairman Dave Plyler

said Thursday that it sounds like city officials are willing to talk more about the issue.

For the third Thursday in a row, talk of the airport and stormwater fees dominated the county commissioners' weekly briefing session.

County commissioners first discussed a year ago whether to ask state legislators to de-annex the airport from Winston-Salem. Supporters say de-annexation would put Smith Reynolds on a more competitive footing with other airports such as Piedmont Triad International Airport,

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because aircraft at Smith Reynolds would no longer be taxed by both the city and county.

Also, the airport would no longer be subject to city stormwater fees. The Airport Commission of Forsyth County, an independent unit of the county that operates Smith Reynolds, pays about \$118,000 in stormwater fees each year. Airport officials say that is equal to about 20 percent of the airport's annual net income and is money that could be invested in airport infrastructure.

Last year, airport officials asked the Winston-Salem City Council to exempt airport runways and taxiways from the stormwater fee, saying they are public thoroughfares. The request has been in committee and has not been voted on by the full council.

The Airport Commission voted March 23 to explore de-annexation, which airport Director Mark Davidson then brought before county commissioners.

Scott Piper, chairman of the Airport Commission, spoke to county commissioners Thursday about

the importance of making Smith Reynolds more competitive. De-annexation is just one possible method.

"It is about being on an even playing field," Piper said.

Don Martin, vice chairman of the commissioners, said de-annexation is a way to make the airport more competitive, but it does not have to be a de-annexation issue. There are other ways they could discuss, he said. It gets down to money.

Commissioner Walter Marshall said the airport needs some help with economic issues, but he thinks city and county officials should deal with it locally.



Marshall

"Everything that goes there (to Raleigh), they add something else to it that's going to hurt cities. ... We might go down there and be talking about the airport commission, stormwater, and it wind up being something else," Marshall said.

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