

Tuesday, May 7, 1985

The Airport Issue

Forsyth County Commissioner David L. Drummond put the airport issue succinctly and accurately the other day when he said, "As community leaders, we need to recognize when to compete and when to cooperate. In my opinion, this is a time for us to get together and cooperate."

The issue is whether Forsyth County should be represented on the Regional Airport Authority. Opponents contend that such representation would cause Winston-Salem's Smith Reynolds Airport to lose federal funds because it would be an acknowledgement that the Regional Airport is Winston-Salem's airport. Supporters point out that almost a third of the passenger traffic at the Regional Airport is generated by residents of Forsyth County.

On Saturday, at least two people who should know told a meeting of interested officials that Smith Reynolds would not lose federal funds if Forsyth County was represented on the regional authority. An attorney for the Airport Commission of Forsyth County said, "They're wrong."

It would be better, of course, if it could be firmly established that federal funds would not be lost. The amount of money — more than \$150,000 a year — is not insubstantial. But the arguments of representation opponents to the effect that Winston-Salem has lost federal and state funds, jobs and tax base because the city has allowed its airport to lose commercial jet service ignore the reasons behind those losses. Sure, those losses are to be deplored, but the reason they occurred is a matter of simple economics: Smith Reynolds just didn't generate enough commercial traffic.

Those who still think that Smith Reynolds will ever seriously compete with the Regional Airport have their heads in the sand. The Regional Airport is just too convenient and too well-established with the major commercial airlines. You don't hear complaints from passengers about the dominance of the Regional Airport, only from people clinging to the anachronistic notion that Winston-Salem ought to support its own airport. If it turns out to be true that representation on the regional authority causes Winston-Salem to lose federal funds, that

probably says more about the viability of Smith Reynolds as a commercial airport than it does about the advisability of such representation.

Smith Reynolds' immediate future is as a maintenance facility for Piedmont Airlines and as a general aviation facility. There may be an opportunity to build on the Sunbird Airlines concept of short-hop flights in small planes, but it is unlikely that the airport can attract enough commercial business in direct competition with the Regional Airport to give it anything like the status of, say, LaGuardia in relation to John F. Kennedy in New York City. Those who insist that Smith Reynolds has a real future in commercial air traffic suffer from a sort of bunker mentality, an attitude that, since we have a facility of commercial quality, we have to use it.

Logic suggests that the air service needs of Winston-Salem are better served by promoting the Regional Airport. Providing the Regional Airport with the demand that will increase the supply of service there makes far more sense than attempting to wage a competition war with what can only be considered inadequate troops and questionable ammunition.

Actual representation for Forsyth County on the regional authority is not, to be sure, a life or death matter. The Regional Airport has been serving Winston-Salem and Forsyth County well for some time now without such representation. The issue is really more symbolic than substantive.

Civic pride is a virtue not lightly dismissed. Winston-Salem has a lot of which to be proud. Abandoning its airport could, in a sense, be viewed as bailing out just because the going got a little rough. But that line of thought seems provincial. Winston-Salem and Forsyth County have more than their share of assets and favorable comparisons in any competition with Greensboro and Guilford County. A commercial airport facility is not one of them.

Let's face it. As Commissioner Drummond said, competition has its time and its place and so does cooperation. The airport issue is a classic case of the time and place for the latter.