

Olson: Annex proposed airpark site (ECSU)

2007-09-26

<http://www.dailyadvance.com/local/content/news/stories/2007/09/25/092507CouncilAviationRM.html>

By [BOB MONTGOMERY](#)

Saying too much has been invested in the planned \$10.4 million aviation park to risk failure, City Manager Rich Olson wants the city to take full control of the project's review process by annexing the site.

Sometime in the next week, Olson is expected to ask City Council to authorize him to begin the process of annexing nearly 62 acres acquired for the project.

While the city was expected to annex the site once it was purchased from the Hollowell Family Limited Partnership, Olson wants to speed up the process.

The reason for Olson's concern is Pasquotank commissioners' decision last week to try and hold up the project if city officials persist with plans to acquire by eminent domain a 100-foot-wide path of land adjacent to the Hollowell tract.

Commissioners voted 5-2 to send a letter of protest to Gov. Mike Easley and area legislators over Olson's plans to force the sale of the tract if the property owner won't sell.

Olson said Valerie Hall, who owns the 100-foot wide tract, has been offered \$86,170 for the property, or \$21,542 if she'll agree to give the city an easement. So far, Hall has rejected both offers.

Olson said the city needs Hall's land as a buffer from the proposed aviation-commerce park. He said he continues to discuss the sale with Hall, hoping that she'll change her mind. But if she will not, Olson said he would consider using eminent domain to acquire the tract.

At last week's commissioners meeting, Hall's son and daughter-in-law and several of their neighbors showed up to protest the city's plans.

"The lowest thing a public official can do is threaten to take over a property," said Commissioner Marshall Stevenson, who moved to adopt the letter of protest. The letter also urges state officials to withdraw funding for the project if the city condemns land.

The aviation park project has already been awarded \$3.5 million by the N.C. Department of Commerce, most of which was spent to acquire the Hollowell tract. When it's complete, the park will include an aviation science building for Elizabeth City State

University and hangars for several new aviation-related businesses. Officials estimate the project could create up to 500 jobs and pump \$150 million into the local economy.

Olson said the city has too much to lose by leaving its development review process in the county's hands, even though commissioners earlier this year agreed to rezone the proposed site for the aviation park from agricultural to industrial, and office and institutional. He said the city has already committed \$500,000 for design work on the project.

"The action taken by the board of commissioners now places the aviation park and ECSU aviation program in jeopardy," Olson wrote to council. "City staff now believes that it is in the city's best interest to annex the property. This will allow the council to control the development process.

"This is not the preferred way to handle this matter, but it would ensure that the project is built to meet the city's, ECSU's and private industries' needs," Olson's memo reads.

Several commissioners urged Olson to re-draw plans for the aviation-commerce without the 100-foot buffer. Olson said the 100-foot strip is necessary to the project's success.

"The layout chosen by the airport authority and city staff was the one which allowed both the (Airport) Authority and ECSU to maximize the use of their land," Olson said. "It was discussed at great length the problem that condemning the Hall property could have on the viability of the project. However, it was the only plausible option."

Olson, who attended last week's commissioners meeting, said he felt the board only heard one side — those opposed to the project. He said supporters of the project, including ECSU Chancellor Willie Gilchrist, should have been invited to provide a balance of opinion.

"I believe that the action taken by the board of county commissioners will further strain the city/county relationship," Olson said. "The issue that concerns me the most is when one governmental entity takes a position which is critical of another governmental entity that will have an adverse effect on the entity receiving grant funds."