

Oceano Airport Project Fails to Fly

Coastal Commission Clips County's Wings

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In the final minutes of the last item on the last day of the California Coastal Commission's December meeting, San Luis Obispo County withdrew its application for a project at the Oceano airport.

The withdrawal of the project, before the vote, was prompted by the Coastal Commissioners' majority sentiment that the project was not in line with Coastal Commission Environmental Justice (EJ) Policies. According to the Commission staff report, the Commission's EJ policy was created "to provide a framework to consider fair outcomes..." to communities that have been left out of or marginalized in the government review process "...and/or whose households have been disproportionately burdened by environmental hazards, often stemming from forms of development with significant burdens (e.g., industrial development). The goal is to make sure these voices are thoughtfully considered by the Commission during the decision-making process."

The county's proposed \$1.8 million airport upgrade at the 60-acre oceanside site included adding a pilots' lounge, pilots' shower/restroom building, renovating and upgrading the existing pilots' private campground area, including approximately 5,150 square feet of permeable synthetic turf to serve as open space and an area for activities (e.g., lawn games); and a children's play structure. The campground functions as a fly-in-only private pilots' campground, not open to the public. Overnight camping costs would remain at \$15.

While the Commission staff report suggested numerous conditions of approval to the project in an effort to address a number of the complexities of upgrading a private airport in a distressed community, Commissioners were not persuaded that the necessary steps would be taken to protect the community from further degradation due to poor land use decisions.

Commissioners expressed concerns that a Master Plan for the community would be completed too far into the future to have a meaningful impact. They were concerned that with upgrades, the airport use would become a de facto priority coastal use if the permit were issued without the benefit of a Master Plan for Oceano, continuing the cycle of indifferent planning in the community.

The staff report noted that past Commission actions acknowledge the challenges facing the lower-income community from historically poor land use decisions, including a badly sited regional wastewater treatment plant, noise and emissions impacts from an airport sited in the middle of town, and "...high vehicle emissions/traffic from the Pier Avenue vehicular entrance to Oceano Dunes, and air quality impacts from vehicular use in Oceano Dunes." It noted "grievances about the community being a beach town that is unable to use its beach given such traffic and Oceano Dunes vehicle issues. In many respects, the Oceano community is a classic case of a lower income community of color disproportionately suffering from land use incompatibilities."

Though the Commissioners' discussion did not address the environmental aspect of the physical location of the site, the airport is subject to numerous Coastal Hazards noted in the staff report: "including but not limited to episodic and long-term shoreline retreat and coastal erosion, high seas, ocean waves, storms, tsunami, tidal scour, coastal flooding, landslides, bluff and geologic instability, bluff retreat, liquefaction and the interaction of same, many of which are likely to worsen with future sea level rise." The historic choice of this site for an airport in a coastal floodplain may have been expedient for 1950, but land use decisions now need a hard look at the future realities of sea level rise and climate impacts.

The Coastal Commission staff report for this project is a deep dive into the challenges of repairing and upgrading 20th-century planning for 21st-century needs and the demands of equitable use of natural and economic resources.

Kudos to the Commission for questioning the EJ basis of the project and taking steps to correct the deficiencies of mid-20th-century planning. Let's hope the County can rise to the challenge and "Re-vision" the Oceano airport to the best advantage of the community and surrounding environment.