



JOHN
TORINUS

What's next for West Bend Airport?

Shorten buffer area and Hwy. 33 can stay where it is

The \$29 million expansion project that has been in the works for more than three decades got shot down last week by the Federal Aviation Administration for a number of reasons:

- The proposed 5,500-foot strip—with 1,000-foot buffers added on each end for a total footprint of 7,500 feet—would have required an expensive re-routing of Highway 33 in a bump-out to the north.

- That extension to the northeast would have trampled some important wetlands at a time when underground water tables are dropping all over Washington County.

- Plane traffic by businesses in the county did not justify a 7,500-foot pathway, which is needed only for larger jet passenger plans.

- Economic developers, political leaders and environmentalists in the county never arrived at a compromise that the FAA could support.

The truth is that businesses don't need a strip that can handle eight to 12 passengers. They need a strip that can handle smaller jets, and a 5,000-foot strip would probably do the trick for that purpose. Smaller jets already use the existing 4500-foot strip on a regular basis.

We also don't need the 1,000-foot buffer areas that the aviation bureaucrats insisted on. The present buffers are only a couple hundred feet on each end, and we have been living with them for a long time.

These dimensions are exceedingly important, because a shorter footprint, say 6,000 feet with buffers could be fit into the present airport acreage without having to move Highway 33. And the wetlands to the north of Highway 33 could be avoided.

A shorter strip won't make the NIMBYs (Not In My Backyard) happy. They wrap themselves in green clothing, but really would just like to see the airport go away.

But it should accommodate level-headed environmentalists, who understand the green-and-gold philosophy of moving the economy and environment ahead together. They know a healthy economy is essential to affording a green community.

It may be true that the airport is in the wrong place, sitting as it does along bends in the Milwaukee River. Call it a historical accident, but it is where it is, and there is no other place in the county that anyone has identified as an acceptable substitute. The West Bend facility serves Ozaukee as well as Washington County, so the thought that the Hartford Airport is a better answer doesn't work.

Some preliminary assessments suggest that the 6,000-foot layout could be aligned east and west, not too much different from the present runway in that direction. If necessary, a buffer, which is never used except for emergencies, could be extended over the Milwaukee River with a bridge. Such bridges have very little negative environmental impact.

The real need for the airport is modernization. The present strips are considered unsafe, and the instrument landing systems need updating. The need for modernization has not gone away with the FAA turn-down of the 7,500-foot plan.

A missing element in the painfully long, highly bureaucratic decision-making process was the absence of political leadership. It was left in the hands of John Capelle, the city's community development director. But he is a civil servant and is not supposed to be out in front of projects.

Mayor Chris Deiss and the Common Council need to get involved. Washington County Chairman Herb Tennes and the supervisors need to get involved. Our economic developers need to take a stance. Our legislators need to get involved, some of the funds and approvals come from the state.

Most importantly, our congressmen need to lead the way. These projects are always a separate federal earmark, whether you like earmarks or not. Sens. Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold did little, if anything, for the West Bend cause, perhaps because of the absence of a local compromise.

And Rep. James Sensenbrenner was AWOL throughout the long life of the project. His leadership was missed. Federal funds account for 80 percent of these projects, so it can't get done with him on the sidelines.

This is not a good time to be looking for federal earmarks. We all understand that. But the revamped project will take some time to put together, and the economy will get better over time.

The next time around, a local consensus and political leadership must be part of the package.

(John Torinus is chairman of the board of Serigraph, Inc. in West Bend and a past editor of the Daily News.)