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February 24, 2011

The Honorable Gary W. Bauer
The Honorable Joe Hintz
The Honorable Larry J. Silcox
Huron County Commissioners
180 Milan Avenue
Norwalk, OH 44857

Dear Commissioners:

On October 19, 2010 the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) wrote you expressing concerns about reports provided to us by our local members and articles in the local newspapers concerning the potential for closing the Norwalk-Huron County Airport (5A1). That letter is enclosed for your reference. Current newspaper articles indicate that the Commission is still considering closing the airport in order to allow the Summit Motorsports Park to expand their operations and while the airport is still open, temporarily shut down operations at the airport to allow ingress and egress to the racetrack for five specific nights during the 2011 racing season.

AOPA remains strongly opposed to closing and selling the airport, but we understand the need to work with the racetrack to benefit the county and the airport on these nights. As many people have commented to the newspaper articles and also hopefully to the FAA, if the runway is to be closed to use by aircraft then the airport should be paid a reasonable fee for allowing that closure. We have heard \$8,000 mentioned as that amount, if that amount is determined to be reasonable it should go to the airport fund and be spent at the airport in accordance with Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) policy and federal laws concerning airport revenues. A potential use of that money would be as the local match money for upcoming FAA airport improvement project grants. Failure to put the money into the airport account or spend it on the airport could be construed as revenue diversion and open the County to possible enforcement action from the FAA.

We understand that the County is faced with shrinking budgets and increasing need for revenue. We contend that it is important and required under federal regulations for airport sponsors to do their best to honor contractual obligations with the Federal government with respect to their airport. It is certainly a challenge to continue to operate a well maintained and managed airport on a very tight budget. It is our understanding that so far the airport has managed to maintain a balanced budget and continue to provide services to the community that wishes to avail themselves of them. The County has an Airport Authority duly constituted under the Ohio Revised Code that can take much of the day-to-day operating burden off of the County Commission's hands if they are allowed to do so. There are publications that can offer guidance and ideas on every imaginable airport related topic such as management and marketing of small

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airports, understanding obstructions and airspace protection, ensuring compatible land use, dealing with wildlife attractants and hazards, and perhaps most importantly airport revenue diversification and innovative finance and alternative revenue sources. All of these publications are free to download from the Airport Cooperative Research Program web site at <http://www.trb.org/ACRP/Public/ACRP.aspx>. The Airport Authority can work with the incoming part-time airport manager to study these guides, adapt best practices and put in place strategies that can help improve the airport and the County's bottom line. Another potential ally in making the airport an economic generator is the Huron County Development Council. By working with them to market the airport to potential businesses, emphasizing the accessibility by small business aircraft such as piston single and multi-engine aircraft you can attract new business to the County.

As anyone who is familiar with the racing industry knows, there are many drivers and teams out there who use general aviation aircraft to efficiently move around the country. Certainly many of those are business jets but there are many individuals who use smaller aircraft to get from race to race. Improvements to the Norwalk-Huron County Airport can help attract them as well.

In summation, instead of looking for ways to close the airport, we believe the County should be looking at ways to strengthen it and allow the Airport Authority the latitude to use their professional aviation judgment to develop the airport into the economic engine it has the potential to be. Using the enthusiasm and vigor of your local airport support group can also help change the image of the airport and work to gain the entire County's trust and confidence that the airport and the racetrack can in fact work together. Failure to do so is just not worth the hassle that the FAA can bring when they feel that the airport sponsor is not living up to their end of the grant assurances.

Of course AOPA is willing to help the County work towards a more robust airport too. Thank you for your consideration of our views on this subject.

Sincerely,



John L. Collins
Manager
Airport Policy

Enclosure

cc:

Mr. Dennis Sokol, Chairman, Norwalk-Huron County Airport Authority
Mr. Alex Erskine, Program Manager, FAA Detroit Airports District Office
Mrs. Debbie Lake-Wagner, AOPA Airport Support Network Volunteer 5A1



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October 19, 2010

The Honorable Gary W. Bauer
The Honorable Mike Adelman
The Honorable Larry J. Silcox
Huron County Commissioners
180 Milan Avenue
Norwalk, OH 44857

Dear Commissioners:

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) represents the general aviation interests of 405,000 members, more than two-thirds of the nation's pilots – including 12,539 in the state of Ohio. AOPA is committed to ensuring the future viability and development of general aviation airports and their facilities as part of a national and state transportation system.

We are writing to express our concerns over recent newspaper articles sent to us describing a movement to close the Norwalk-Huron County Airport (5A1) in order to allow the Summit Motorsports Park to expand and acquire the airport. AOPA certainly understands your interest in supporting the Motorsports Park, but we must strenuously object to such a drastic measure as closing such a valuable asset to the community as the airport and selling off the land. It is also our understanding that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) met with the Airport Authority and the County Commissioners recently and laid out their concerns with this proposal, including specifically telling the County that they cannot close the airport.

There are several factors that preclude the county's ability to close the airport. First and foremost is the fact that the County, as the airport sponsor, has accepted more than \$1 million dollars in FAA Airport Improvement Program (AIP) funds since 1985. \$989,283 of that are considered current grants with obligations to keep the airport open as an airport until 2027. In 2003 and 2007 a total of \$486,502 in federal funds purchased land for airport use. Under FAA policy the use of federal funds to purchase property for the airport obligates the sponsor to keep the entire facility in use as an airport in perpetuity.

While the FAA has a process in place that allows an airport sponsor to petition the Associate Administrator of Airports for release from the grant obligations, the FAA is not interested in allowing publicly owned, public use airports to close. To underscore the FAA's position on this enclosed are three letters for your information. Two letters deal with the Albert Whitted Airport in St. Petersburg, FL and the third is the FAA's detailed response to the City of Bakersfield, CA when they petitioned the FAA to release them from their obligations because the airport was not self-sustaining and the City was supporting them with part of the City's funds. In both cases and in other examples as close as the Elyria-Lorain County Airport the FAA is adamant that federally obligated airports will remain open.

Second, the airport has a current master plan and airport layout plan that depicts a shift of the runway to the west in order to better accommodate ingress and egress from the Motorsports Park. Instead of discussing closing the airport the County should be working with the FAA to implement the projects on that FAA-approved document. There is no reason to believe that the airport and the Park cannot be compatible attractions for the County, providing a destination point and attracting more business aviation uses in addition to the personal aviation currently at the airport. Close coordination and cooperation between the County, the Motorsports Park and the FAA is necessary for this to happen.

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Third, one of the newspaper articles we reviewed mentioned the possibility of building a new airport somewhere else in the county. While this may be a desired avenue at some point in the future, it is not a realistic plan for immediate results. It takes between 7 to 10 years to build a new airport starting from square one. This includes conducting a feasibility study and site selection process, updating the Ohio State Aviation System Plan and the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems, preliminary environmental planning, land acquisition, master planning, an environmental impact analysis and finally airport development – engineering design and construction. While all this is going on and being paid for by the airport sponsor, the current airport must be kept open until such time as the new airport is operational. The proceeds from the sale of the old airport will be used to pay for the new airport, but the FAA will not fund two airports at the same time. It is our understanding that the Motorsports Park owner is looking for something faster than this particular process. Again, closure of the airport is not the quickest option, rather working with the FAA to begin the process of shifting the runway would be a faster solution.

Fourth, even if a decision is reached with respect to shifting the runway, the Motorsports Park will need to utilize the airport as a method of ingress and egress next year for several of their larger events. This will require securing permission from the FAA and ensuring that there is a safety plan in place to prevent the mixing of aircraft and motor vehicles on the movement surfaces of the airport. Additionally, if this plan includes closing the airport, no matter how temporary, the Motorsports Park must compensate the County as the airport sponsor for its use of the airport at a rate commensurate with the use. As a suggestion, the County's matching share for upcoming projects related to shifting the runway should be considered as a reasonable fee.

In summation, AOPA is strongly opposed to the closure of the Norwalk-Huron County Airport. We respectfully suggest that the County seriously look at shifting the runway as depicted on the airport layout plan. Thank you for your consideration of our views on this issue. If we can be of further assistance please contact me at 301-695-2200.

Sincerely,



John L. Collins
Manager
Airport Policy

Enclosures

cc:

Mr. Alex Erskine, Program Manager, Federal Aviation Administration Detroit Airports District Office
Mr. James Bryant, Aviation Administrator, Ohio Department of Transportation, Division of Aviation
Mr. Ronald Davis, President, Ohio Aviation Association
Mrs. Deborah Lake-Wagner, AOPA Airport Support Network Volunteer 5A1