

Agenda Report



MEETING DATE: Friday, March 15, 2024

TO: City Council

FROM: AIRPORT DIRECTOR WILLIAMS
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR MERRIAM
ASST COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT DIRECTOR MEEK

THROUGH: CITY MANAGER MENDEZ

SUBJECT: COUNCIL DIRECTION ON THE FUTURE OF WATSONVILLE
MUNICIPAL AIRPORT RUNWAY 9/27

RECOMMENDED ACTION:

Staff recommends that the City Council make a determination on shortening or closing the crosswind runway (Runway 9-27).

BACKGROUND:

On October 24, 2023, the City Council took action to adopt the Watsonville Municipal Airport Master Plan 2023-2043 and 2023 Airport Layout Plan update. The Airport Master Plan update is a long-range planning document that describes the future aviation and non-aviation needs of the airport and community. The Airport Layout Plan (ALP) is a set of drawings approved by the FAA that show planned capital improvements at the Airport, which must adhere to the FAA's airport design and airspace protection criteria. As discussed during the Council meeting, the ALP shows a shortened Runway 9-27 by 870 feet to address the runway visibility issue (or "line-of-sight" requirements) previously identified by the FAA.

The City Council's unanimous approval provides a road map for efficiently meeting aviation demand while preserving the flexibility to respond to changing industry conditions.

During the Master Plan update presentation, the Airport Director noted the FAA's San Francisco Airport's District Office (ADO) approved the plan update but stated Watsonville's crosswind runway was among approximately 600 airports, across the United States, that would no longer be eligible to receive Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants for their crosswind runways. The rationale provided was a change in "design standards" dictated by the FAA.

The FAA San Francisco ADO determined that although the primary runway (Runway 2-20) met design standards, Runway 9-27 did not meet airport design requirements to be designated as a crosswind runway. As such, the Airport's Crosswind Runway would be designated as an "Additional" Runway.

An Additional Runway is not eligible for AIP funding but must be maintained and supported by the sponsor in accordance with Grant Assurances, specifically Assurances 8 (Consultation with users), 9 (Public Hearings), 18 (Planning Projects), 19 (Operations and Maintenance), 21 (Compatible Land Use), 29 (Airport Layout Plan) and 34 (Policies, Standards and Specifications).

As noted during the October 24th presentation, immediately after the determination was communicated, the Airport Director informed City Management and the Community Development Department that the planned Crosswind runway threshold relocation would not be funded by the recently submitted AIP grant request.

Upon direction from City Management the Airport Director informed the City Council that the ADO determination could effectively result in three options relative to Runway 9-27 disposition. With the General Plan Update underway and the need for the City to consider and maximize future options for the development of much needed housing and economic development, the following three options were presented:

- (1) Move forward with relocating the threshold 870 feet as included in the Airport Master Plan and shown on the ALP, resulting in a 3,128-foot crosswind runway;
- (2) Move forward with relocating the threshold 1,590 feet, resulting in a 2,408-foot crosswind runway; and
- (3) Move forward with deactivating Runway 9-27, resulting in the closure of the crosswind runway.

Staff were directed to return to the City Council by March 2024 with a detailed presentation which would offer guidance and define the required actions and activities to relocate the Crosswind Runway Threshold by 1,590 feet, resulting in a 2,408-foot crosswind runway or deactivate (i.e., close) the Crosswind Runway resulting in one runway for the Watsonville Municipal Airport.

More recently, on Saturday, February 10, 2024, was a Council Retreat to explore the development potential of various growth scenarios through 2050 and other key planning considerations as part of the General Plan Update. This 3-hour interactive meeting included the City Council and over 50 members of the public and interested stakeholders, including representatives of pilot groups. Following presentations on a range of topics concerning options for growth, their benefits and challenges, and various scenarios for Watsonville's future, were a series of small group and facilitated discussions. The meeting provided an opportunity for the public to not only learn about future plans but also provide input directly to staff and Council members. At the conclusion of the meeting, Council directed staff to consider the second growth scenario with "Area C." This option involves focusing on infill first, anticipating a new passenger rail station, pursuing visitor/community-serving uses in the new Highway 1 Gateway area, planning for a wide range of housing in the Buena Vista and Area C growth areas, and closing the Airport's crosswind runway.

FAA designation of the crosswind runway as ineligible for continued funding affords the City Council an opportunity to relocate the runway threshold (thus addressing the FAA identified

safety issue) or to deactivate (close) Runway 9-27 (which removes the California Airport Land Use Handbook Safety Zones). Closing the crosswind runway would remove limitations on potential future development within City limits and previously identified growth areas (i.e., Buena Vista) affected by restrictive airport safety zone criteria.

DISCUSSION:

The following is information to consider when determining whether to relocate the threshold by 1,590 feet (shortening the runway) or deactivating the runway.

Reason for Crosswind Runway

Historically, the crosswind runway has accounted for as high as 15% of the Airport's total flight operations. The most recent Master Plan Update (2021) noted the crosswind runway accounts for less than 2% of the Airport's total flight operations. The percentage delta is a combination of: (1) a general decline in aviation operations over the last twenty years, (2) the ability to more accurately account operations via satellite-based technology and (3) the fact the since 2018 takeoff operations have been severely restricted by the FAA for specific safety (line-of-sight) reasons mentioned above. Within the last two years (2022-2023) the crosswind operations have increased to 4% of total operations. The Airport believes this is the return to pre-COVID 19 levels and an improved economy.

There are three primary factors that underscore the utility of Runway 9-27. These are: (1) Safety of Flight challenges, (2) supporting Aviation flight training and On-going operations and (3) the runway serving as the foundational component of the Airport's Emergency Aerial Support Action Plan which was instituted in 2019.

Threshold Relocation by 1,590 feet

Relocating the Crosswind Runway Threshold by 1,590 feet resulting in a 2,400-foot Crosswind Runway would alleviate the current Runway Visibility Zone (RVZ) issue which is restricting departures (Take-Offs) from Runway 27. Relocating the threshold would require amendment, adjustment, and updating of the Airport Master and Airport Layout Plans to reflect the new configuration.

The Airport Safety Zones for the crosswind runway affect the development potential of land within City limits, such as along Freedom Boulevard, and in the Buena Vista future growth area. With the retention of the Crosswind Runway, approximately 212 acres of developable area in Buena Vista would remain undevelopable due to Safety zones 2-4. These 212 acres are mostly flat and easier to develop than other hillier parts of Buena Vista. Further, the way that the Safety zones bisect the Buena Vista growth area will make development segmented, and ultimately more costly due to the inability to construct contiguous neighborhoods.

Reduction of the Crosswind Runway length by 1,590 feet would allow for additional development near the Freedom Boulevard/Green Valley intersection, including the Kmart shopping center and 4-acre vacant parcel on Green Valley Road.

Closure of the Crosswind Runway

Deactivating the Crosswind Runway, resulting in only one runway, would likely have a modest, if not marginal impact on most aircraft operations. Although the paved surfaces would not be available for takeoffs and landings, the surface would be available for yet to be defined or developed aviation uses. Closing the Crosswind Runway would require amendment, adjustment, and updating of the Airport Master and Airport Layout Plans to reflect the new configuration.

Buena Vista: Closure of the Crosswind Runway will free up development in Buena Vista, which could accommodate 1,320 units over the next 25 years, with a maximum potential of approximately 4,300 units. The removal of safety zones 2-4 on the Buena Vista side allows for cohesive development pattern and significantly more units. Commercial development on Freedom Boulevard would only be limited by restrictions in Safety Zone 6.

Future Growth Projections

Growth projections are being developed as part of the General Plan Update process. The amount of anticipated growth is important to estimate needed housing, grow the local economy, and plan for how utilities can accommodate this growth. At the February 10 Council Retreat, Staff presented recommended development projections through 2050 of 5,980 dwelling units and 3.2 million square-feet of non-residential development. These figures consider the Regional Housing Needs Assessment (“RHNA”) figure of 2,053 dwelling units that the City is planning to accommodate in the next eight years as part of the 6th Cycle Housing Element Update. Staff expect the City will have to plan for accommodating a similar amount of new housing through the 7th and 8th cycles as well (i.e., through 2050).

These figures represent growth beyond past trends. As compared with AMBAG’s growth projections, the number of housing units being planned is approximately three times the number of housing units anticipated by AMBAG. A key reason for this difference is because AMBAG’s figures do not account for the RHNA figures or any advanced planning work yet to be adopted. In addition, AMBAG’s forecasts are projecting slower growth because of recent demographic trends suggesting declining birth rates, declining family formation rates, increasing household formation rates at older age groups, declining household sizes, and possibly increasing out-migration.

SUMMARY:

As outlined in this report, the crosswind runway provides an additional option for pilots in taking off and landing at the airport in the relatively infrequent instance in which the wind is blowing perpendicular to the main runway. Relocation of the threshold or closure of Runway 9-27 will reduce the options pilots will have to take off and land safely at the Watsonville Municipal Airport, however the data shows that the runway accounts for only 4% of total operations (2022-2023).

When considering the varied needs of the Watsonville community, the Airport is but one piece of a very large and complex puzzle that includes regulatory mandates related to transportation, housing, and greenhouse gas reductions among the needs and desires of the community at large. The community has signaled that a big priority is the provision of a variety of housing types, from studio apartments to single family residences. To accommodate single family

residential development, the City must look outside our boundaries, and the one future growth area that exists within the City's Urban Growth Boundary is Buena Vista.

With the relocation of the Runway 9-27 threshold, development opportunities will continue to be stunted, as it is today, due to a large area in the middle of Buena Vista located within Safety Zones 2-4. This "hole" in the future growth area will prevent a cohesive development pattern, limit the number of units that could be built, and result in more costly development (economy of scale).

Closure of Runway 9-27 would remove safety zones on the east and western side of the airport, freeing up development of Buena Vista and resulting in fewer development restrictions in safety zone 6 on the eastern side of the Airport.

The Airport Master Plan reflects a pathway to extend the main runway and develop and improve the airport to increase its viability and enhance its potential. Regardless of the option directed by the Council, directing staff to bring back future extension of the runway and development of the airport should be considered.

STRATEGIC PLAN:

The decision to relocate the threshold or close the Crosswind Runway aligns with the Council's priorities for housing and economic development as outlined in the 2023-2025 Strategic Plan. While the economic benefits of the Airport cannot be negated, this should be balanced with the fact that the Airport Master Plan provides a pathway to extend the main runway and develop the airport, thereby enhance its economic development potential. Furthermore, shortening or closing the Crosswind Runway may not be as detrimental to the Airport in the long term as the economic benefits that development in the north Freedom corridor and Buena Vista will provide to the community. In addition, closure of the Crosswind Runway will unlock the full development potential of Buena Vista, resulting in the eventual development of thousands of housing units.

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

Relocating the Crosswind Runway Threshold by 1,590 feet resulting in a 2,400-foot Crosswind Runway would likely take twenty-four months with a yet to be determined cost but likely \$500,000 funded by the Airport enterprise Fund.

Deactivating the Runway, resulting in only one runway will require at least four years to complete with an unknown cost, however that cost is substantially higher than the cost of a threshold relocation. Such deactivation would be funded by City's and not the Airport Enterprise Fund as use of these funds would be a violation of Grant Assurance 19 (Operations and Maintenance) and 25 (Airport Revenues).

ALTERNATIVES:

The City Council may choose to accept the Airport Master Plan's original proposal for an 870-foot reduction, resulting in a 3,128-foot crosswind runway.

The City Council may choose a phased approach to closing the Crosswind Runway, reducing the length to 1,590 feet, and allowing its use to continue while the City goes through the process of ultimate closure.

ATTACHMENTS:

- 1) Watsonville Municipal Airport Runway 9-27 Disposition presentation
- 2) Amy Choi's San Francisco Airports District Office Manager Letter dated August 22, 2023