WORK SESSION

M E M O R A N D U M

DATE: May 26, 2009

TO: The Board of Supervisors

FROM: Tucker K. Edmonds, Chair of the Community Airport Committee

SUBJECT: Airport Feasibility Study

Overview

The Airport Feasibility Study was initiated in August 2006 as a result of the current owner of Williamsburg-Jamestown Airport (JGG) indicating a desire to sell the property. As part of the Study, a Community Airport Committee was established with the following members: Carl Gerhold, Digby Solomon, Tim Caviness, Mark Willis, Steve Montgomery, Steven Hicks with James City County, and Tucker Edmonds as Chair.

The overall purpose of this Study was to: **Determine the demand for aviation services and the alternatives available to serve this demand in the James City County area.**

The Williamsburg-Jamestown Airport is a privately-owned, public use facility that has been in existence since 1970. The airport is host to 77 based aircraft, the vast majority of which are small, single-engine propeller aircraft. These aircraft, along with those flying to JGG from other airports, account for approximately 22,000 takeoffs and landings annually. The current Virginia Aviation Transportation System Plan (VATSP) acknowledges that JGG serves an important element of the Greater Williamsburg Area (GWA) area aviation demand. JGG is classified as a General Aviation Community (GC) airport within the state system. A GC airport provides general aviation facilities and services to business and recreational users. It is estimated that in 2007, JGG served as a gateway to bring some 8,000 visitors into the local communities.

During the Study process, input and discussion was coordinated with Kimball Consultants, the Community Airport Committee, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), Virginia Department of Aviation (DOAV), and the General Public as a result of a Public Workshop held on October 27, 2008, and a public comment period at each committee meeting.

As a result of the Study findings and additional discussions with FAA and DOAV, a recommendation for a further course of action has been made by the Community Airport Committee. This recommendation is presented to the Board of Supervisors for their consideration at the end of this memorandum.

The Study Report

The Study Report consists of six chapters as defined below:

1) **Existing Conditions** – Introduces the geographic study area and tabulates important inventory data that will be relevant to the Study, such as socioeconomic data, environmental factors, etc. The Williamsburg–Jamestown Aviation Service Area is also defined here.

2) **Aviation Forecasts** – Discusses previous and current levels of activity occurring at JGG and projects probable levels of future activity over the Year 2010 to 2025 time period.

3) **Financial Feasibility and Public Value Assessment** – Analyzes economic considerations associated with JGG, and summarize both qualitative and quantitative benefits.

4) **Airport Requirements Analysis** – Analyzes the ability of the existing JGG site to meet current FAA design standards, and defines optimum airport requirements and design standards to better serve Airport users.

5) **Alternatives Evaluation Procedures** – Introduces and defines the alternatives, criteria, and the evaluation procedures to be used to evaluate three established alternatives. The alternatives are: Alternative A – "Status Quo"; Alternative B – "Local Acquisition"; and Alternative C – "Develop New Airport".

6) **Alternatives Evaluation Results** – This chapter presents and summarizes the results of the evaluation, and contains both an Alternatives Evaluation Matrix and an Alternatives Scoring and Rating Matrix. The evaluation provides decision-makers with information relative to the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative.

Important Study Findings

- Completed Based Aircraft User, Visiting Pilot/Passenger, and Renter Pilot survey forms show that the vast majority of users expressed complimentary comments regarding the existing airport. These users referred to the excellent services received as well as the convenient location of the airport as major reasons for their continuing use if the airport.

- Aviation Forecasts developed during the Study indicate a moderate activity growth potential over the Year 2007 to 2025 time period. Here, the Number of Based Aircraft is projected to grow from a 2007 level of 77 Aircraft, to a 2025 level of 111 Aircraft. Over the same period, Total Aircraft Operations are projected to grow from a 2007 estimated level of some 22,000 Annual Operations to a 2025 projected level of some 30,000 Annual Operations.

- The Study estimated that the Total Economic Contribution of the airport to the Region in the Year 2007 was more than $2.8 Million.

- While there are several FAA design standards that are not currently being met, our primary concern is that there are several constraints at the existing site that may preclude it from being developed to meet the long range aviation needs of the GWA. In addition, to provide for the proper Runway Safety Area (RSA) length at the southeast end of the existing runway (which has a current published length of 3,204 feet) - a shifting of the runway to the northwest, or a shortening of runway length would be required. Here it is noted that any reduction to current runway length would reduce Airport utility for many existing users.

- With a Score of 109 and a Rating of 747.0, Alternative "C" – Develop New Airport achieved both the highest score and rating of the three alternatives evaluated. Alternative "B" – Local Acquisition achieved the next highest Score (97) and Rating (641.7), while Alternative "A" – Status Quo achieved the lowest Score (94) and Rating (601.4). Alternative "C" achieved the highest score and rating primarily because, if an optimum new airport site can be found, this alternative offers significant advantages over disadvantages.

Important Agency Comments

- DOAV has advised that if the County decides to pursue either acquisition of the existing airport or a green field site, a Site Selection Study would be the next step in the process.

- FAA has advised that while there is no current commitment of FAA funding, the soonest a grant could be offered to continue to advance the planning effort would be next fiscal year (around March 2010). Furthermore, there is no specific formula for FAA funding so the exact contribution from the sponsor cannot be determined at this time.

- FAA has advised that should the County pursue acquisition/sponsorship of the existing Airport and seek FAA funding support, modifications to the current Special Use Permit will be needed to meet grant assurance requirements. These modifications are precipitated by the reluctance of the FAA to fund airports which have significant restrictions to their operations or to their economic viability.

Recommendation

The Airport Feasibility Study clearly indicates that general aviation access is a valuable and necessary service in James City County. The committee recommends that the County should pursue the best available options for the continuance of aviation services in the community, both in the short-term as well as the long-term.

Recognizing the benefits of a general aviation airport as identified in the study, the issue becomes one of funding. Substantial funds are available for airport acquisition, development, and improvement from the FAA and the DOAV. This funding could cover up to 98 percent of the cost of the project. While the FAA typically provides the majority of funding support, FAA standards are more stringent.

The feasibility study has identified numerous issues associated with the current JGG which would likely preclude access to FAA funds. These issues include, but are not limited to the following.

- Limitations imposed by the existing Special Use Permit.
- Proximity to an existing landfill.
- Obstructions created by the existing landfill.
- Sub-standard conditions in current runway safety areas.
- Sub-standard conditions in runway width.
- Difficulty in obtaining the required obstruction easements.
- Lack of an acceptable access road.

It should be noted that the present JGG currently operates in compliance with the DOAV standards and DOAV has provided funds for various projects at the airport. Non-compliance with FAA standards is allowed because the airport is in the state system and is not in the federal system. Therefore, it is not currently eligible for federal capital development funding. In addition, the Community Airport Committee has had discussions with the Peninsula Airport Commission (PAC) and discussed during the Community Airport Committee meetings the possibility for the PAC providing the management and operation for JGG. Additional analysis and negotiation with the JGG owner and PAC would be needed should this be considered.

Given the positive advantages of local general aviation as well as the challenges to federal funding, the committee does not recommend public acquisition of the current JGG unless it is determined there is opportunity for Public/Private partnership or additional study indicates that an adequate site for a new facility within the GWA is not available.

Instead, the committee recommends analyzing and pursuing the next phase of the process which is a Site Selection Study. This process would identify and qualify sites in the GWA that would be suitable to build a new airport to service the long-range aviation needs of the GWA. This step should be taken in cooperation with other municipalities and interested parties. Once all the relevant issues are addressed, the acquisition and construction of such a facility would be much more likely to be able to be funded in large part by FAA funds, with additional funds from the DOAV. It should be noted that there are potential risks related to the grant funding process. The grant itself should identify any financial liability to the County if a suitable site is not located as a result of the study.

Furthermore, the committee recognizes that acquisition and construction of a new airport is a lengthy process, often taking as many as 15 years. The committee therefore recommends that the County adopt a role as a facilitator to identify an appropriate Airport Sponsor. The Sponsor would then negotiate with the existing airport owners to determine a means to retain the existing aviation services at the JGG, either through a lease agreement or the acquisition of the airport by another private entity, Commission or Authority.

Tucker K. Edmonds
Chair

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Attachments