



ORCA: Oregon Coast Alliance

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Protecting the Oregon Coast

April 27, 2011

Oregon Aviation Department
3040 25th St. SE
Salem, OR 97302

Re: Cape Blanco Airport Transfer Discussion

Sent via Email

Dear Oregon Aviation Board Members,

Oregon Coast Alliance (ORCA) is an Oregon nonprofit corporation whose mission is to protect the Oregon coast by working with coastal residents for sustainable communities through protection and restoration of coastal natural resources, and education and advocacy on land use development. We write this letter on behalf of our members in both Curry County and elsewhere on the coast who recreate in Curry County.

The Aviation Board's agenda for its April 28th, 2011 meeting in Portland shows a "working lunch" for a discussion with Curry County Commissioner George Rhodes about a possible Cape Blanco Airport transfer. ORCA is very concerned about any proposal to transfer Cape Blanco Airport to Curry County, for several reasons.

Curry County Board of Commissioners considered this transfer at a Board meeting April 27th. The agenda for that meeting is attached. It is clear from the other items listed that Curry County has many serious budget problems and is deep in negotiations to restructure several County departments and reduce staff. Proposing to take responsibility for Cape Blanco Airport, at a minimum initial cost of \$15,000 annually to come from the County's general fund, is curious and potentially irresponsible.

Curry County provided ORCA with a copy of its draft Finance Plan for taking over management of the Airport. We question several of the statements made there, and trust the Board of Aviation will do the same. Some of our concerns include:

1. The Finance Plan, referring to finding resources for increased Airport costs down the road, says: “Additional equipment will be obtained if required,” and “Additional resources will be retained as needed,” when discussing the Maintenance Plan and the Management Plan respectively. The Plan further describes a goal of upgrading the Airport to a Category 4 facility by improving existing assets and developing support facilities. But Curry County does not have the financial ability to undertake such repairs and expansions. Where will the money come from?
2. The Finance Plan compares Brookings Airport to Cape Blanco by way of estimating upkeep costs, describing existing staff expertise and similar matters. But Brookings Airport is different than Cape Blanco, and does not have the same upkeep needs. The Finance Plan says the County “plans to use the physical characteristics of the [Cape Blanco] airport...to provide improved opportunities for critical air operations in emergencies such as tsunami relief, fire response, and air ambulance.” This proposal will be quite costly; and as no one can predict a tsunami or other natural disaster, this does not seem to be a good reason for Curry County to gain ownership of the Airport, especially given the Airport’s unique location and runway length, substantially above sea-level and outside the range of a tsunami.
3. The Finance Plan makes unsupported statements about soliciting “private investment funds” for lease opportunities at the Airport. But no such investment funding possibility has been made public, and the State has an obligation to ensure its airports, if transferred to another party, are properly maintained. This is especially true for Cape Blanco, which is classified by FAA and ODA as an emergency facility.
4. Cape Blanco Airport is a Non-National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (non-NPIAS) facility. This means it is not eligible for FAA funding, which would seriously handicap Curry County in trying to raise funds for its upkeep and expansion. The Finance Plan says the County will work with FAA to obtain NPIAS standing. But the runway would have to be extended for that, presumably. If it were extended to, say, 8,000 feet, that would require either extensions into farmland or into Oregon State Park land. Both would be highly controversial. Furthermore, is there a need for Cape Blanco to become an NPIAS facility?
5. There does not seem to be a reasoned approach to goals for the Airport transfer. The Finance Plan vaguely states, “County intends to develop economic resources afforded by the airport and adjacent properties including development of eco-tourism and other revenue generating opportunities.” What is this about, and why is the Airport necessary to such a goal? Ecotourism generally requires preservation of natural resources; low-impact development; sustainability; community involvement; and environmental education (*Cape Blanco Airport Area Economic Feasibility Study*, January 2008, pp. 45-47). Curry County has produced no detailed proposals, or even an outline of steps to be taken, to reach

an ecotourism goal. Nor has there been a straightforward explanation of why the Airport is a necessary part of this laudable move towards ecotourism.

6. The initial February 24, 2011 Curry County public notice of an executive session stated, "This concerns possible real estate transactions with the State of Oregon regarding property at the Cape Blanco Airport and adjacent lands." There has been no further public information about such real estate transfers regarding any of the "adjacent lands" mentioned in the February public notice. There certainly has been no aboveboard, open community dialogue with communities in Curry County, or other interested publics, about this proposal to date. No one knows how the Airport fits in to any plans the County might have. It would seem, therefore, that the Airport transfer is part of a larger, unspecified, project. ODA should not pursue a transfer with Curry County for such a project when none of the details are known, nor have been discussed in the community. Any proposal to undertake "real estate transactions" with State lands in the Airport's vicinity would likely be very controversial.

In conclusion, ORCA requests the Aviation Board to take no action on Curry County's transfer proposal unless and until all details of the full proposal come to light, and a complete public process ensues. ODA eventually needs to determine if such a transfer is in the public's best interests, both for residents of Curry County and for residents of Oregon as a whole. Even at this early discussion stage, we doubt that it is.

Please provide ORCA with all materials about this proposed Cape Blanco Airport transfer, and place this letter in the file concerning the matter.

Sincerely,

/s/ Cameron La Follette

Cameron La Follette
Land Use Director