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Future of airport expansion: \$35-63M

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CHARLOTTE — Pros and cons of relocating the city's airport, along with the news that the project cost is estimated at anywhere between \$35 million and \$63 million, took center stage last week.

About 200 people attended an April 30 forum in which Mead & Hunt employees Stephanie Ward and Kevin Mulcaster presented their final study findings.

Mead & Hunt was hired by Charlotte city officials in September to study the feasibility of expanding Fitch H. Beach Municipal Airport's 3,500-foot runway to 5,000 feet. Ward said an expansion would allow for increased use of the facility for corporate jets.

They gave an overview of the two sites being targeted for possible relocation:

- A north/south expansion at the airport's current location requires rerouting, closing or adding a traffic tunnel to Island Highway, a primary county road. Cost is estimated between \$38 million and \$63.5 million.
- A relocation of the airport to Eaton Township would involve purchasing 15 homes and occupying 360 acres of farmland. An estimated cost is \$35.5 million.

Mulcaster said expanding at the current location would represent a minimal impact to residential properties, requiring the purchase of only two. He said it would maintain the airport's visibility and improve access from it to I-69.

However, the impact to Island Highway is significant, said Mulcaster, and would require an extensive traffic study. It would also impact about 800 feet of Butternut Creek.

Moving the airport to Eaton Township would allow for future growth of the facility, would not impact any roads and make the facility "a regional airport."

CITY OFFICIALS REACT

Since the study's beginning, township residents and officials have protested. Initially, 11 relocation sites were identified by Mead & Hunt and were narrowed for environmental and other factors.

Petitions opposing a relocation have been submitted and the actual final report from Mead & Hunt contains hundreds of letters opposing the project.

Several Charlotte City Council members attended the presentation wearing "no airport relocation" tee-shirts.

The final decision regarding the airport's future rests with the council. A 7 p.m. Tuesday public hearing is planned at the Charlotte City Complex.

Council Members Tom Raymond and Dee Smith, already on record in opposition to using eminent domain to acquire property for the airport's expansion, were both struck by the project's estimated price tag.

"The final report was a little bit of an eye-opener for me," said Raymond, who said when the study began, estimates were quoted at \$6 million to \$7 million.

Council Member Tim Lewis stressed the City Council initiated this study.

"The council has the responsibility to look at the resources that are within their boundaries and to evaluate them," Lewis said.

Mayor Deb Shaughnessy said the current site has too many constraints to support expansion.

"The bottom line is that I don't believe those who support expansion of the airport have demonstrated a clear need for this amount of spending taxpayer's money."

Councilwoman Mary Jean Baker said officials are left with using the current site.

"As far as the choices, we don't have a choice," she said. "We have an agreement with Eaton Township that we won't annex land for the expansion."

But Councilman Kevin Weissenborn said although he is still evaluating the final report, expanding at the current airport doesn't make sense.

"If we expand it in the future we're going to find ourselves in the same situation that we are today," he said. "I don't view it as a long-term solution."
