

Panel to Currituck: Build more hangars

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CURRITUCK — An advisory panel is urging the Currituck Board of Commissioners to build more hangars at the county airport to meet customer demand.

The Currituck Regional Airport has a long waiting list for hangar space, the county's airport advisory board told commissioners this week. That demand is likely to grow with the county's plans for developing Currituck Community Park in Maple, said county Economic Developer Peter Bishop. The new commerce park and the Aviation Technical Training Center at the site will only increase activity at the airport, he said.

At a work session Monday, Paul O'Neal, chairman of the Board of Commissioners, said he recognized the need but had hoped the airport could attract a private contractor to build and lease a new hangar.

"The gravy train is over," O'Neal said in apparent reference to several multi-million-dollar construction projects footed by the county in recent years. "The Board of Commissioners is going to have to prioritize every project 1-2-3-4 because (they have) to be paid for."

Finding a private investor willing to take on the \$1 million project may not be easy, a few advisory board members said.

Airport board member John Snowden said considering the average hangar rental rates in the region, an investor would have to wait 30 years before recovering costs. Not many private contractors are willing to do that, he said.

Airport Manager James Elliott said private companies are looking to make a 15 percent return or higher on their investment. The airport's current hangar rental rates would not make that possible, he said.

Elliott said one private customer is interested in building a hangar for his personal use and may be interested in partnering with the county in building a commercial hangar larger than what he actually needs. The arrangement could cut construction costs for both parties, Elliott noted.

The work session ended without a commitment from commissioners for funding. O'Neal asked the airport board to return with a plan so the county could figure out its costs. He offered no guarantee that county funds would be available for the construction project.

County Manager Dan Scanlon said it's unlikely state funds would be available anytime soon for the project.

A T-hangar with space for 10 airplanes is listed on the airport's Transportation Improvement Program that identifies priorities for state funding. But a T-hangar is not one of the state Department of Aviation's top priorities, which makes funding doubtful, said Elliott. In fact, the hangar has been on the TIP list for at least a decade and has not received state funding yet.

Elliott said he would have no problem filling the hangar if it was built.

For the past two years at least, about 20 to 25 potential customers have been on a waiting list for hangar space at the Currituck airport, Elliott said. The current hangar houses about 30 aircraft, he said.

The boards discussed possibly raising rental rates to make building a hangar more attractive to private investors.

Elliott said existing rates — from \$200 to \$475 a month depending on the size of hangar space — are in line with other airports in the region. Currituck charges a little more than airports in Edenton and Plymouth but less than Elizabeth City, he noted.

The county charges less than airports in Hampton Roads, Va., area, which makes the Currituck airport an attractive option to out-of-state customers, Elliott said.

Elliott said building a new hangar could mean higher rates for future customers at the airport. Differing rates between newer and older hangars is not unusual, he said.

County officials agreed that adding more hangar space would have economic advantages for the county.

Property taxes on an airplane bring in about \$3,200 each, said Snowden. Fuel purchases and other retail sales also contribute to the local economy without demanding costly county services, including schools, airport board members said.

The potential for more county income appeared to catch commissioners' attention.

"If we have 20-30 people waiting, we need to do something," said Commissioner Butch Petrey.