

# Re: Ravalli County Airport expansion

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With all the furor about cutting Title X funding and putting Forest Service lands (“USFS” – Under Suzie Foss’ Supervision), we need to focus on another issue as well: the Ravalli County Airport. A draft EA (Environmental Assessment) will be tendered to the Commissioners very soon. There will be a very short window for public comment, and the Commissioners are likely to approve construction of a new mile long runway, spending many millions of dollars and having to zone a lot of surrounding private properties, with very dubious public benefit. Before the debate begins, you deserve the facts.

History. In the early 2000’s, the FAA told Ravalli County that if our airport was being used by “large corporate jets,” our taxiway and runway were too close together by 40 feet. (The phrase “large corporate jets” is used here to substitute for some very technical terms used by the FAA based on airplane landing speeds, wing spans, tail heights, etc.) There were some dubious claims by airport folks at the time that there were over 1500 “large corporate jet” takeoffs and landings each year. That number, as best they can actually document, is now down to under 500, a critical point discussed later. The major user in the early 2000’s was the “large corporate jet” owned by Rocky Mountain Log Homes. It has since been sold and not replaced.

What ensued was a series of EAs and public hearings. In 2002, a Republican Commission gave the voters of Ravalli County a right to vote on any extension of the runway more than its current 4200 feet, which would open up the airport to extensive use by “large corporate jets.” In 2010, based on an EA contracted in 2008, the so-called “Option 2A” was selected by an earlier Commission and forwarded to the FAA. Bowing to the vast majority of public opinion, gathered in numerous public hearings, Option 2A would not extend the airport runway from its current 4200 feet but only move it away from the taxiway. This Option 2A was approved by the FAA and returned to the Commissioners in December 2010. It had only to be published in an official newspaper in early 2011 and it was a done deal. The money was ready. Said again, the FAA clearly and unambiguously found that Option 2A provided all requisite safety.

But we had had an election and the new (and our current) Commissioners took office in early January 2011. They did not like the limitation of the runway to its current 4200 feet, or at least somebody they were beholden to did not like Option 2A. They wanted a mile long runway to encourage “large corporate jets,” ignoring the documented public sentiment. So, they revoked your right to vote on the issue, ignored the years of public hearings and commissioned still another EA (at a cost of about \$75,000). This one was directed to justify the “large corporate jets” runway. And this is what will very shortly be the subject of public hearings.

Why should you care? Lots of reasons.

Pollution, vibration and noise, noise, noise! “Large corporate jets” cause a lot of noise, vibration and air and ground pollution from exhaust. Studies by the FAA repeatedly show that property values decrease when air traffic is increased. One recent study showed the average decrease as over 25%.

Zoning. Before the FAA will fund any part of a runway extension, it will require zoning of surrounding properties to preclude lawsuits. So if you live relatively close to the proposed new mile long runway, you will be zoned out of being able to sue for damages to your property. (Just to put this in perspective, the zoned area will extend from at least Tammany Road to Hamilton Heights and beyond. It will encompass approximately ten square miles and impact hundreds of homeowners.) Zoning, you ask? Yes, zoning; property restrictions. Oh, they may call it “Airport Influence Area” or “Airport Affected Area” or some other cute name. It is zoning, pure and simple. Even the FAA calls it that. Remember Suzy Foss and her rants about “back door zoning?”

Money. When the FAA approved Option 2A, the estimated cost of the project was \$7,500,000 and the County’s share was 5% or about \$375,000. Since the rejection of Option 2A by the current Commissioners, the amount the FAA will pay has declined. Now, the FAA will only pay 90% of a project so the County’s share has increased to 10%. And the mile long runway will cost a lot more than Option 2A. We do not have the draft EA yet but there will have to be a significantly larger amount of land purchased and concrete laid. A reasonable estimate based on the 2008 EA would be \$17 to \$20 million. The County’s share would be \$1.7 to \$3 million. When Option 2A was on the table, Montana Aeronautics, a statewide group, offered to pay half of the County’s obligation. It is presently unclear if it still has the financial means to contribute anything to the cost. If the County has any obligation for this project, it will be your tax dollars paying it.

Benefits. At first blush, it would appear only ten or twelve Ravalli County residents or part time residents would benefit by being able to fly in their “large corporate jets” to Hamilton rather than Missoula. But perhaps there is more at play here. Perhaps the reason the runway needs to accommodate “large corporate jets” is because there is a plan afoot to build a large gambling casino, turning Hamilton into a mini Las Vegas. The “large corporate jets” would be needed to bring in the whales to gamble and fly out. Maybe the jobs being touted are casino jobs.

Safety and Jobs. The Commissioners and allies will trumpet safety and jobs. Those signs are still found illegally placed around the County. But this is pathetic. Recall that the FAA had approved Option 2A in late 2010. The FAA found that that solution provided the desired safety. You do not get more safety extending the runway another 1000 feet and encouraging “large corporate jets.” And Ravalli County could have had the work accomplished, and jobs created, in 2011, during the worst of the national recession. Do not be fooled. This current boondoggle has nothing to do with jobs or safety. And do not get hoodwinked with the argument that a longer runway is necessary to permit planes fighting fires to takeoff with loads of fire retardant. The average retardant load taking off from Missoula is virtually the same as Ravalli County airport.

Hypocrisy. When the indigent women's health care was voted out by our Commissioners, one of the reasons given was the spending of that \$40,000 in federal funds during a time of growing national deficits. Now, the Commissioners will spend over \$17 million to benefit maybe a dozen airplane owners or one large landowner with a vision of a large casino or both. When safety and jobs is touted, remember that it could have been done at much less cost, as approved by the FAA, three years ago. When the Commissioners find they need to zone land, against the wishes of the property owners, remember all the rants against zoning that got them elected in 2010.

Solution. The FAA is only concerned with the proximity of the runway and the taxiway if there are over 500 landings and takeoffs of "large corporate jets" during a year. The airport folks cannot document those 500 events. And even at the 490 events documented in 2012, the number has decreased from the 1500 ballyhooed in the early 2000's. This is a downward trend, not an upward trend.

So, Commissioners, you simply agree that Ravalli Airport is not and should not be used by "large corporate jets." No safety issues. No zoning. No huge federal and local expenditures to benefit a very small group of residents. No hypocrisy. Imagine that.

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