

Hold Out Holds On in Eminent Domain Standoff over Airport Expansion - Freedom Foundation of Minnesota

Life, liberty and landing strip on City of Mora's radar

There may not be air traffic controllers in Mora, Minnesota but critics say the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and state transportation officials have fallen asleep on the job anyway by approving a [controversial airport expansion](#) project estimated to cost between \$1.2 to \$1.7 million. This controversial airport project proposes using federal and local funding to seize private land for municipal airport improvements.

The controversy involves nine acres of woods and wetlands owned by Greg and Deb Yankowiak that the city wants to cut down and fill in to construct a backup grass strip "crosswinds runway" that will not be available for landings at night or in winter. It's become personal for Greg Yankowiak, who planted many of the doomed trees with his sons on the 75 acre nursery he runs. Yankowiak says he was once denied a permit to dig out and improve one of the wetlands the city now plans to fill in.

"I question seriously how we are defining eminent domain in this day and age," Yankowiak said. "We are entitled to life, liberty and property and none of that can be taken away without due process. We're not talking about a main runway. If eminent domain can take land for a grass runway, every city with an airport would fit into that definition."

The City of Mora maintains, however, that the grass airstrip is needed as an alternative landing site to the main runway in case of heavy winds. The city shut down an existing crosswinds runway in 2007 to make way for an industrial park, which remains about two-thirds undeveloped.

[Federal Aviation Administration funds](#) will pay for 95 percent of the cost with local taxpayers ultimately expending \$226,000 for the project. The Capital Improvement Plan for the [Mora Municipal Airport](#) on MNDOT's website includes \$130,000 to acquire Yankowiak's property, though the nursery owner says he's been offered less than one-third of that.

"Eminent domain, nobody really likes to do it," said Joel Dhein, Mora city administrator. "I think the issues involved with the pilot safety, there's a lot of varying opinions. If it wasn't a safety issue, would the FAA and State of Minnesota want us to build one?"

Opponents point out that the Mora Municipal Airport has operated safely (for four years) without the grass airstrip, which many smaller airports do not offer. They also note that nationally known entertainers appearing at nearby Grand Casino in Hinckley sometimes land there.

In a last ditch effort to keep his property, Yankowiak took out a [full page color ad in the local newspaper](#). In that paid advertisement, he invited his Kanabec County neighbors to attend what may amount to his last stand at a Mora City Council meeting Tuesday night. The ad includes pictures of the trumpeter swans, geese, coyotes and other wildlife that populate his property. At this point, it appears only one member of the city council supports him.

"Just because we're able to get grant money to do it doesn't mean it's the right thing to do," city council member Denise Akkerman said. "It still costs taxpayers money, whether it's federal money or property tax money. Anybody who travels or flies on an airplane has to pay that."

The city has spent \$49,000 on environmental credits to replace wetlands lost in extending the main runway in 2007 and the grass airstrip, according to city administrator Dhein.

"Mr. and Mrs. Yankowiak are nice people, it's been very amicable," Dhein said. "He's got a position and he's got a right to have an opinion about somebody taking his land. I guess it's up to the council to decide whether to take his land or not."

If the plan for the crosswinds runway is approved, the city will proceed to condemn the Yankowiaks' property after approving a bid and receiving funding from the FAA. They expect this action to occur after they receive FAA funding this summer.

"I can't afford a lawyer," Yankowiak said. "So I'm going to the court of public opinion."

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Tips or comments? Contact [Tom Steward](#) at 612-354-2192.