

# After 20 years, FAA push leads city to approve controversial runway

By Tom Steward, Watchdog.org-Minnesota Bureau | September 22, 2015

Greg Yankowiak wanted to save his property and preserve surrounding woods and wetlands, smack dab in the way of a 20-year battle to build a \$1.3 million runway.

Most likely, the runway project has won.

The Mora City Council recently approved the project after the Federal Aviation Administration and state officials intervened.

“I’m just fighting for the things that are going to be disrupted by going right through the middle of (these) woods with this runway,” Yankowiak said. “... Just as a citizen, I’m fighting to stop wasteful government spending, especially when it involves destruction and impairment of our natural resources.”

“They just wanted to know what the city was going to do. They were in favor of the project, but they weren’t going to ram it down our throats,” said Mora City Manager Joel Dhein.

State and federal aviation authorities had long sought the emergency landing strip, which would serve as the only [crosswind runway](#) within 60 miles. But, in July, [city councilors](#) unanimously voted to postpone what critics dub the “runway to nowhere,” declining to proceed until the number of airport operations “increase to an acceptable level.”

The action prompted a call from Andy Peek, manager of the FAA Dakota-Minnesota Airports District Office. The FAA held out a carrot and a stick, according to City Council meeting minutes describing the call to Dhein.

The city applied for an FAA grant to cover the \$36,200 cost of condemning 9 acres of Yankowiak’s land for the crosswind runway.

But the FAA tied approval of the grant to the city moving ahead on the proposed runway, council minutes indicate.

“Both the State and the FAA are ready to fund the project (runway) now and are not willing to give a grant for reimbursement of the Yankowiak land, if there is no commitment for building the runway,” according to city meeting minutes.



*TAKING OFF: The City of Mora, MN reversed course on approving a controversial \$1.3 million crosswind runway after the FAA got more involved in the process. (City of Mora photo)*

In return, the FAA offered to pay for 90 percent of the runway, leaving the state and city to split the remaining cost — \$65,000 apiece.

At a special meeting Sept. 8, city councilors abruptly reversed course. With assistant director of the Minnesota Department of Transportation Office of Aeronautics Services Kathy Vesely and Peek looking on, council members approved the long languishing project in a 4-1 vote.

“There’s been some frustration over how long this process has been going on. I think they really wanted to make a decision one way or the other. The feds and the state convinced them, just basically because of pilot safety was the main reason to have this,” Dhein said.

“I think the input from the state had an influence, at least on my vote,” said Mora Mayor Jack L’Heureux. “I don’t know about the rest of the council members. She made it very clear that they are very supportive of having the project go forward and feels that it’s much needed in the state of Minnesota.”

**FAA and MnDOT downplayed the agencies’ roles in the council’s sudden change of mind.**

**“We’re not advocates for airport development. We provide a funding program for them if they choose to. I was there to answer questions,” said the FAA’s Peek.**



*IN THE WAY: The city used eminent domain authority to acquire 9 acres of Yankowiak’s woods and wetlands for the project.*

“If the feds approve it for one of our airports, we generally go along with it and don’t necessarily need to question it because they do a pretty thorough review,” said Daniel McDowell, a MnDOT public affairs coordinator.

Brandon Akkerman was the lone city councilor to oppose the project.

**“I think the FAA wanted to get it done just for their airport system to make it safer for pilots and everything,” he said. “But I think that should be this community’s problem to deal with it. If they want to make it part of their system, it should be their deal.”**

A check of city records shows Yankowiak attended at least 33 city meetings to speak against the project.

“When we went to the first meeting in ’95, they said every airport is zoned for a crosswind, but it’s unlikely we’ll ever do it,” said Yankowiak. “Well, they had it planned and designed when they said that. Where we go from here? I don’t know.”

**Copied 9/23/2015 from: <http://watchdog.org/238893/20-years-faa-push-leads-city-approve-controversial-runway/>  
(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added by aiREFORM)**