

Longmont Moves Forward With New Mile-Hi Skydiving Lease

Karen Antonacci, TimesCall Staff Writer | 02/23/2016



A twin-engine Mile-Hi Skydiving plane taxis after coming in for a landing last year at Vance Brand Municipal Airport in Longmont. (Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer)

After extensive public comment, tough questions and an impassioned speech, the Longmont City Council approved a new lease with Mile-Hi Skydiving by a 5-2 vote on first reading late Tuesday.

Councilwomen Polly Christensen and Joan Peck dissented.

The lease replaces a problematic 20-year lease that Mile-Hi owner Frank Casares signed with the city in 2007. The 2007 lease was for 180,723 square feet of land that Casares intended to use to build a facility to house all of Mile-Hi's operations.

Per the original lease, Casares was to pay \$41,566 per year starting when he applied for a grading permit for the land. But Casares never requested that permit and so never paid any of the seven years' lease rates in full, constructing instead a temporary quonset hut structure still in use for parachute packing.

In roughly 2013 or 2014, city management discovered the faulty lease and realized that it may violate rules the Vance Brand Municipal Airport must follow in order to receive Federal Aviation Administration grants. The FAA instructed the city to resolve the issue, and in order to avoid a lawsuit, the city negotiated a new 12-year lease with Mile-Hi.

The replacement lease, which Casares has signed but must still pass second reading at by the City Council on March 15, is only for the 12,780 square feet under the quonset hut, at a rate of \$4,507.51 per year.

The lease issue is further complicated by the years-long battle in the court of public opinion and Boulder District Court between Mile-Hi supporters and local residents who believe the skydiving operation is too loud and flies too often.

Multiple Boulder County and Longmont residents, many of whom are also members of the organization Citizens for Quiet Skies, urged the council to either modify or reject the replacement lease.

"As a taxpayer, I want to know how things got this far out of sync and what is being done to correct the — for lack of a better word — oversight of the dollars owed the city and not paid by Mile-Hi," Longmont resident Norma Figgs told the council, adding that she wants to see "Mile-Hi held accountable."

Ron Krenzel, a longtime Mile-Hi supporter, repeated his claim that a hearing problem is actually the source of annoyance for the people who are displeased with the Mile-Hi planes.

"There is no reason not to approve the lease before you tonight," Krenzel said.

The noise issue then played into the quonset hut land-lease discussion as Peck and Christensen queried Airport Manager David Slayter why the city can't impose extra fees or other restrictions on Mile-Hi.

"I'm unclear about why the city is unable to have any control over bad actors at the airport," Christensen said.

Slayter replied that the city was simply providing a facility for planes to take off and land, and the FAA regulates the planes when they are in the air.

City Manager Harold Dominguez added that there are anti-discrimination clauses in FAA regulations that "say you have to treat everyone the same."

Councilman Brian Bagley said he understood the noise complaints and the frustration on the part of Longmont and Boulder County residents.

"It sucks," Bagley said.

But Bagley said that while the replacement lease may not make everyone happy, City Attorney Eugene Mei got several things in the lease correct.

"First of all, every April 1 they have to pay an advance. And there is no late fee ... however after 30 days, they're in breach. And then there's a whole list of things the city can do, including bringing down the wrath of God and kicking them out of the airport," Bagley said. "They would be in big-time trouble as my 8-year-old says ... so hold City Council accountable to that."

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