

Lake Tahoe Airport on course to remain open without return of commercial service

By Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe Airport is not going to have commercial air service any time soon, if ever. Lake Tahoe Airport is not going to stop being an airport. Lake Tahoe Airport could be more than it is.

Those were the major points delivered Thursday night at a meeting about the master plan for the South Lake Tahoe airport.

Michael Hotaling with the consulting firm putting together the master plan for the city and FAA on May 29 went over issues that were brought up from the February meeting – which centered on making it more than a general aviation facility and closing it down.

Hotaling said to have commercial flights it would require a subsidy. Mammoth subsidizes its airport by \$2.5 million a year. City Manager Nancy Kerry said she has been asking people at meetings if they think that is a wise use of city funds – assuming the city had that kind of cash – and the overwhelming response is “no”. The same outcome came Thursday night.



Lake Tahoe Airport is not apt to see commercial service any time soon.
Photo/LTN file

When the airport had commercial service in the past there were subsidies as well as marketing support for some of the airlines.

The city is already spending \$300,000 a year from the general fund to support the airport. This is down from a high of \$600,000.

But the city is in no position to cough up money to support this type of enterprise when the few "extra" dollars it thought it would see this fiscal year are evaporating because of the dismal winter and potential loss of parking revenue.

"It doesn't make sense for only city residents to fund this airport," Kerry said.

She would like El Dorado and Douglas counties to have a financial stake because they benefit from people flying in.

The Federal Aviation Administration would have the ultimate say over whether the airport closes. And even it said "yes", the city would have to repay the nearly \$20 million in grants it has received from the federal agency.

Going forward, Hotaling said, the city needs to consider options for the airport beyond current uses.

"The niche could be catering to folks who already are coming here," he said. This would involve enhancing the facilities in some manner – making it a destination of sorts.

More than a dozen of the nearly 80 people at the meeting had a question or comment.

Transportation beyond air service was a concern of several

people. Some remarks had to do with how people get to other parts of Tahoe once they fly in. Others questioned the environmental impact of air service in terms of how will people get around once they are in Tahoe.

It was brought up how there is no bus service to the airport.

An air shuttle service between South Lake Tahoe and Sacramento and Reno was also broached. Kerry said this idea has been talked about but has not gotten off the ground.

One person suggested there be pilots' quarters over hangars, as well as having the drive-up market stop at the airport and then be shuttled to their final destination.

Reducing the runway in some form – like shortening it – was an idea.

Sherry Miller, airport manager, said if that were to occur, then the airport would be less viable and the FAA may not approve doing this. Concerns are whether large firefighting aircraft would then be able to land, as well as safety concerns because of the air density involved during the summer.

“They don't like airports to limit their use,” Miller said of the FAA.

The airport runways' width have been reduce from 150 feet to 100 feet in recent years. This has allowed the city to bank stream environmental zone credits. But no one has come calling for them, so that commodity isn't much of a revenue stream or incentive to get rid of more coverage.

More information about the airport master plan may be found online.