

Future of Lake Tahoe Airport in council's hands

By Kathryn Reed

Before summer is over, a preferred alternative for the Lake Tahoe Airport Master Plan should be selected.

The South Lake Tahoe City Council is expected to discuss the matter July 21 or Aug. 4.

It was in 1992 that a settlement agreement regarding the master plan was reached. This involved the city, state Attorney General's Office, League to Save Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. That document expired in 2012 so the city has been operating the airport without a valid master plan.

The June 30 meeting attended by about a dozen people was the final public workshop before the council takes over. The public will have two more opportunities at council meetings to offer input.

Michael Hotaling, the consultant preparing the master plan, said it's likely the preferred alternative will be a combination of the various proposals that have been whittled down based on public comments, research and staff input. The alternatives separately address the airfield, and land area with buildings and open space.

Under consideration is whether to keep the airport as it is or do something else.

The FAA will have the ultimate say over the Aviation Demand Forecast and the Airport Layout Plan. The feds are paying 90 percent of the cost to create the master plan.



Lake Tahoe Airport's airfield could be altered depending on what the master plan calls for. Photo/LTN file

Closing the airport, while considered early on, is no longer an option. This is because the FAA deems the airport an important element in its greater transportation plan. Plus, it is a resource in emergencies and could provide the only way out of the basin in a catastrophe.

To accommodate a large number of planes like what will be arriving for this month's celebrity golf tournament a temporary tower will be in place. Personnel from Reno will operate it. This is the second year for the portable tower. The permanent one cannot be used because it does not have equipment and the line of sight is blocked by trees.

Bringing back commercial air service is also off the table. The 139 certificate, which would allow commercial service, no longer is in effect. The council in the last year voted to give up that FAA designation.

Based on input from a meeting earlier this year the public is divided over what should be done at the airport. Some want to alter the airfield to allow a larger class of plane that is forecast to be the aircraft of choice going forward, others want to leave things as they are.

The consultants predict air traffic at Lake Tahoe Airport to

increase 1.7 percent in the next 20 years. This means going from 2.7 flights per hour to 3.1.

When it comes to the land segment, some want to get keep the aviation designations for the property in case things change, others want to allow different uses. The city is looking at creating an outdoor events area east of the tower.

In the 2013-14 budget, \$351,972 of the general fund was used to keep the airport afloat. That is a decrease of 43 percent from 2010-11. Hotaling said projections are for that number to continue to decline.