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Thursday, December 08, 2005

Aviation board hopes to land new lease with airport operator

By Bill Gisel

AUBURN — Negotiations are under way for a new lease agreement between the Board of Aviation Commissioners and Victory Aviation, the fixed-base operator of the DeKalb County Airport.

The members of the aviation board would like to see the lease reflect the fair market value of the facilities while at the same time loosening rules and regulations that would create a more competitive environment for airport operations, said airport manager Russ Couchman.

Victory Aviation has been operating under a lease that was negotiated and adopted 10 years ago, when Bowman Aviation was the fixed-base operator.

The lease was taken over by Kruse Aviation, later reorganized as Victory Aviation, said board member Brad Stump.

Under the present lease, Victory pays the county \$41,148 per year, plus a monthly fee for jet fuel sales. A similar fee for general aviation gasoline was suspended as a way to keep fuel prices lower and attract more fuel customers from the ranks of private aircraft operators, Stump said.

The aviation board hired Mesner & Associates of Fort Wayne to conduct an appraisal of the airport facilities and evaluate fair market value of office space, the maintenance hangar and other facilities.

That appraisal, Stump said, came in at double the current value of the lease, or \$82,749 per year.

“Obviously, we would like to see a lease that reflects fair market value,” Couchman said. “That would greatly improve our financial situation.” He said whether that is possible will depend on ongoing negotiations between the board and Victory Aviation, which is expected to present a lease proposal to the board in the near future.



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Hoosier airports have a tradition of subsidizing fixed-base operators, Stump noted, but that is a practice Couchman calls unique to Indiana.

However, Couchman agreed, "fixed-base operators are struggling in Indiana, and I don't know why." General aviation has suffered since Sept. 11, 2001, and more recently from high fuel costs.

Also to be decided is the length of the contract.

"I expect to be writing a whole new contract, which will include changes to rules and regulations, minimum standards and a rates and charges document," Couchman said.

The board has not given Victory Aviation a deadline to return with a proposal, and in the meantime is operating on a month-to-month basis.

Couchman said he expects to meet with Victory Aviation officials in the next week or so in an effort to get the contract resolved.

Couchman said two other fixed-base operators have expressed an interest in operating the DeKalb County Airport.

However, he said the Board of Aviation members are hoping to continue the airport's relationship with Victory Aviation.

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