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Airport working toward longer runway

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AUBURN — The DeKalb County Airport is growing by way of a 2,000-foot runway extension. But actual work on the project won't begin for quite a while, airport manager Russ Couchman said.

As part of a 20-year improvement plan written in 2001, airport officials have been planning to increase the length of the runway to meet the Federal Aviation Administration's optimal runway length. The FAA suggests the runway should be at least 7,000 feet long, based on current airport operations and use.

Currently with a 5,000-foot runway, Couchman said, pilots are forced to limit their loads (which may include fuel, people or freight) to ensure that they are operating safely or risk carrying a greater weight. The goal of the extension is to make takeoffs and landings safer.

"(We want to) ensure that an aircraft can accelerate to the point that it is starting to create lift and then, if something happens requiring the pilot to abort the takeoff, we want them to be able to safely stop before departing the paved surface of the runway," he said.

In preparation for the extension, the airport has been working with Paul Shaffer, a civil engineer and manager of airport development with Butler, Fairman and Seufert, who has kept the airport on target with a myriad of FAA requirements, including the recent environmental assessment.

The assessment included an archaeological survey of the grounds, a wetland survey, two aerial surveys and an environmental impact study to determine possible noise issues.

The airport is awaiting comments from the FAA and approval of the assessment. Then, Couchman said, the airport likely will advertise the assessment locally by placing it on display at the library and the airport. A local hearing may be held, asking for public input. That process should be finished by the end of 2011.

The next step in the extension plan will require the Airport Authority to hold a capital improvement plan meeting with the FAA and the state aeronautics division. Couchman said he hopes to combine the meetings at the annual Aviation Association of Indiana meeting in October.

The meeting will outline how money and events will unfold over the coming years. The FAA will pay 95 percent of the estimated costs associated with the extension, while the state will chip in 1.25 percent of the cost. The airport will foot the bill for the remaining 3.75 percent of the estimated \$5-6 million total project cost.

"Keep in mind that we are still subject to funding priorities and shortfalls, both at the state and federal levels, and that all of our plans must remain somewhat fluid," Couchman said.

Early next year, he said, the airport will begin the next phase of the extension process — wetland mitigation efforts, along with power line burial to the east. Additional property purchases and easements to the east of airport will be necessary to clear obstructions. Airports acquire easements to protect the airspace used by aircraft during takeoff and landing, which ensures that trees or buildings do not penetrate the airspace, creating flight-safety hazards.

Eventual extension of the runway will require changes to C.R. 29 in the way of permanent road closure, a tunnel underneath the new runway to keep road access open or potentially connecting C.R. 64 to the south to C.R. 31. While there are many options, nothing is set in stone, Couchman said.

"The project will be a multi-year effort and, frankly, I don't expect actual dirt to move on the project for at least another four years," Couchman said. "Once we start, we will most likely be under construction for 18-24 months total."