To the list of those opposed to the planned $219 million-plus expansion of the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport, add the major airlines that make the airport go.

Delta and American, two carriers that dominate commercial aviation in Baton Rouge, say the expansion plan — which includes the possibility of Baton Rouge becoming an airline hub city — is basically a nice dream that is both unwarranted and unrealistic, now and in the foreseeable future.

Others, including an airport commissioner and a member of the airport Master Plan technical advisory committee — both of whom are representatives of general aviation — say airport Aviation Director Iray Ledoux and the commission that runs the airport are more interested in “empire building” than in the realistic operation of the airport.

Airport expansion plans include construction of a big new midfield terminal and the purchase of large amounts of land, with an eye toward future construction of a new 8,000-foot runway. The expansion would displace hundreds of families, reroute a state highway and a bayou and, according to the Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission, cause major problems for the zoo, which would be dead in the sights of the new runway.

Ledoux said the expansion plan is based on sound passenger projections and will prepare the airport for the needs of the 21st century. Prudent planning must begin early, he said, before the need arises.

The airport’s consultants say in a report that “planning for airport improvements that will provide a significant increase in the capacity rating should be implemented on an immediate basis.”
The expansion plan already has encountered opposition from some homeowners in the area who have to be displaced, or who will be subjected to more noise, as well as from the Baton Rouge Recreation and Park Commission, which operates the multimillion-dollar Greater Baton Rouge Zoo just north of the airport.

But little has been heard from the airlines.

Robert Byce of Delta Airlines, which represents the airport's four major airlines before the Airport Commission, outlined the airlines' position in a letter last October:

"The acquisition of land, purchase of additional Hopi, and a school is an enormous financial commitment," Byce wrote, adding that although the expansion plans appeared exciting, the airlines wanted to be included in the decision-making process. "We don't believe these plans are in step with what is actually prudent and possible."

A planned $219 million airport expansion program is of serious concern to the airlines serving Baton Rouge.

Gloria Peterson Nye, who represented general aviation interests on the airport Master Plan's technical advisory committee, expressed similar feelings in a letter to the Tampa, Fla., consulting firm that created the plan:

"The traffic forecast being used to justify the plan is unrealistic," Nye wrote Paul Puckli, planning director for the consulting firm, the LPA Group. "My concern is that there is not now, nor will there ever be, enough traffic (and income) to support the proposed facilities."

Nye also complained that although her committee was commissioned to work with Puckli's firm on creation of the plan, that never happened.

"One day they just brought the plan in and said, 'Here it is,' and we were just in shock. We were misused. They developed it without any input from us and we were supposed to bless it."

Airport Commission member Jim Benham, a longtime proponent of airport expansion, said the current airport is adequate for decades to come and that airport should, be used only for "hubbing" in the airport Master Plan would have to be found if the expansion is to take place.

"We have to pay for that, so they need our cooperation," Byce said, adding that the current airport is adequate. And, "speaking for Delta, in the near term we will be looking for areas of prudent budgeting as opposed to developing new hubs," Byce wrote Ledoux last fall.

The airport Master Plan strongly suggests that a new terminal and runway might draw enough business to the airport to support the use of the facility as a regional hub for one or more of the airlines. To an airport, a hub is a major center of activity from which direct flights to major cities are made and through which connecting flights are made from smaller airports. New Orleans International, Dallas' Love Field and Nashville International are examples of medium-sized hub airports.

"While a hub in Baton Rouge is certainly desirable for your community, it cannot become a reality until the traffic dictates a need," Byce wrote Ledoux. "It is unrealistic to expect the passengers to materialize simply because an airport is available. We are unaware of any plans that the airline may have to provide an increase in industry or tourism."

The Federal Aviation Administration suggested in a letter to Ledoux that the expansion of "hubbing" in the airport Master Plan "contains a lot of outright speculation expansion is to take place."

"But they're in business to make money. They will look for the bottom line but they also realize they must take care of capacity for future years," said Benham.

Ledoux said the airlines are fair, but they're tough to deal with and "they're in business to make money."

"The airlines know we will not rape them," he said. "But they're in business. They will look for the bottom line but they also realize they must take care of capacity for future years."

Ledoux said it will be tough convincing the airlines to support the expansion. "But they are fair," he said.

The total, unfinished cost of the expansion is about $219 million, though with interest charges and various financing costs, that would increase over the years.

The expansion would be funded by state and federal aviation trust fund grants, operating income from the airport and bonds, he said.

Consultants are working out the figures, he said, and it's still not known how many millions in airport improvement bonds would have to be sold to finance the expansion.

Ledoux said he hopes the taxpayers of Baton Rouge and Louisiana will not have to pay any more for the expansion. However, if the airline said they don't agree to share in the financing, other sources of funding would have to be found if the expansion is to take place.

"The airport is operated like a business. They are in business to make money," Benham said..

"I want the airport to support its own activities."

Still, he said, "An airport is like a garbage dump or a prison. They all want it but they don't want it in their back yards and they don't want to pay for it."