The Greater Baton Rouge Airport District on Tuesday approved the master plan’s financial feasibility study, which is one of the final steps before actually beginning the capital improvements in the master plan.

Commissioners voted 5-4 to approve the study and endorse the master plan after spending an hour venting the same frustrations and the same arguments they have since the controversial master plan received Federal Aviation Administration approval earlier this year.

The study goes to the Metro Council for final approval July 10.

The feasibility report states that the airport, with its own funds and a good bit of state and federal help, can handle the construction of a new terminal and the acquisition of land. But a new runway, expected to cost more than $150 million alone, shouldn’t be built until early in the next century and then only if air traffic statistics justify it.

The new terminal would cost $77.1 million and the land-banking program would cost $67.6 million to acquire more than 1,500 acres needed for present and possible future expansions, consultants project. Earlier projections suggested the project would cost $210 million, but the cost would now be nearly $300 million.

Some commissioners on Tuesday said they were concerned that the city-parish would be losing money that the
airport still owes for earlier problems, but Commission Chairman Walter Monsour said, "The city-parish has not been out any money, and will not lose any money."

The airport will still owe the city-parish more than $9 million on an $11.3 million 1980 bond issue once the city-parish completes bond payments in 1992, but that amount will continue to be paid off through 2005 as previously scheduled unless it is forgiven by the city-parish, Aviation Director Iray Ledoux said.

Monsour argued that taking action now would allow the airport to expand when it is ready. Despite Monsour's arguments, commissioners Jim Benham, Thomas Woods, Herbert Pate and Mike Babin nevertheless voted against the plan.

Babin said North Baton Rouge is once again having to deal with airport problems while the rest of the city enjoys the benefits. Benham argued that the airport has not considered alternatives in other locations.

Councilman Johnnie Matthews also was present at the crowded meeting, and made known his objections to the plan.

"I have heard the cries of the people who live around this airport," he said. "I agree we should finish the land-banking program. But I think we should stop everything at that point."

Ledoux called the vote a positive step toward easing the minds of nearby property owners.

If the study is approved by the Metro Council, the next step will be to start negotiating with the airlines because their approval also is needed for the plan, and to begin working toward funding the master plan, Ledoux said.