Gov.-elect Edwin Edwards set off speculation about the future of Baton Rouge's proposed $219 million airport expansion Wednesday when he announced his desire to build a regional airport near Sorrento.

Edwards said the airport would replace the New Orleans International Airport. Located between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, the regional airport would be reached by rapid transit.

Metro Councilman Mike Babin said Thursday that a regional airport near Sorrento probably would kill the proposed expansion of Baton Rouge's airport.

Babin, also a member of the Airport Commission, said many of his north Baton Rouge constituents already suffer from jet noise and oppose any expansion of the airport.

"It's very encouraging for me to hear that someone is planning to build outside a very populated area like Baton Rouge," he said. "We do need a regional airport near Baton Rouge, but not in the middle of our neighborhoods."

Babin, however, said building an airport near Sorrento is difficult because of the swampy land in the region. Edwards admitted Wednesday that finding 25,000 acres of land that does not affect the wetlands and a large number of residents is a daunting task.

Babin would prefer to see a regional airport built between Hammond and Baton Rouge near Livingston Parish.

"That would open the doors for tremendous development," he said.

Airport Director Iray Ledoux was singing a different tune Thursday. Ledoux said he expects the expansion of the Baton Rouge airport to continue, despite Edwards' proposal.

"I would think what he does would compliment what we are doing with the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport," he said.

Ledoux, the assistant state aviation director in Edwards' first administration, said he would like to meet with his former boss about the proposed airport near Sorrento.

New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelemy thinks the Sorrento site is too far from his city, but Jefferson Parish residents near New Orleans' current airport are opposed to further expansion of that facility, Edwards said Wednesday.

Ledoux said a regional airport wouldn't affect expansion plans for Baton Rouge's airport.

Other cities such as Dallas that have several airports have expanded simultaneously, Ledoux said. Dallas/Fort Worth, the largest of the airports, didn't stifle the development of the smaller airports, including Love Field.
he said.

Ledoux added that Edwards' proposal is at least 20 years away from reality, while another runway for the Baton Rouge airport is scheduled to start operating in 2004.

“What we're doing should not be placed on hold because of maybees,” he said.

Babin said he doesn't know of any studies that have calculated the effect

of a regional airport between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. A regional airport could significantly alter the number of planes coming and going from Baton Rouge, making the need for expansion unnecessary, he said.

A recent noise study prepared by Howard Needles Tammen & Bergendoff predicted that the number of air carriers using the Baton Rouge airport will increase from 17,500 in 1990 to 37,400 in 1999.

Currently, the airport is taking steps to prepare for the expansion of the airport.

The airport is applying to the Federal Aviation Administration and the state for a total of $40 million in grants to help residents cope with jet noise, insulating homes and buying property from people in high-noise zones.

Ledoux thinks the FAA will take more than six months to consider the application.

On Thursday, the FAA awarded the airport another $7.3 million to handle noise problems, according to a joint announcement from U.S. Sens. Bennett Johnston and John Breaux.

The expansion of the airport, meanwhile, is awaiting the FAA's approval of the noise study and comprehensive environmental studies.