Chairman gets OK to research cost

By GARY GAUTHIER
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GONZALES - The Ascension-St. James Airport Authority Wednesday authorized its chairman to research the cost of building a grass landing strip at a proposed general aviation facility in Ascension Parish.

Also, federal and state officials toured the site and expressed their approval of the proposed airport's location.

The board set a special meeting for Nov. 29 to hear the cost estimate reports for the grass landing strip construction.

The authority voted Wednesday to allow Chairman Nicky Prejean to research increased insurance and security costs that would be incurred by opening the site as a public grass strip.

The 136-acre site is planned near the intersection of Interstate 10 and La. 44, south of Gonzales.

Prejean asked Harry Stafford, a member of the authority's Pilot Advisory Board, to research cost estimates on the actual landing strip preparation.

Prejean told the authority he has been approached by several local airplane owners who suggested that the facility start off with a grass landing strip.

The authority is eligible for over $5 million in federal construction funds, but isn't sure as to the actual amount of the grant.

The authority has already received airspace clearance from the Federal Aviation Administration and is currently working to build ground facilities at the site.

Prejean said the authority could use private donations and local and state funds to start the grass strip, which could then generate its own revenue.

"If the estimates look good and if it doesn't cost too much, we will probably go for it," Prejean said.

The authority must first obtain a state permit as a public grass strip facility, said Joe Lavaera of the state Department of Transportation and Development's office of aviation.

Lavaera said that after touring the site, he saw no problem with permit approval.

Stafford said that opening the facility would relieve some of the heavy traffic at the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport.

"Baton Rouge has a real good field, but there is a heavy mix of general aviation traffic with commercial air transport flights," Stafford said. "Our site would be ideal for training, working or landing practices."

Opening the facility with a grass strip might hold off criticism from area residents, said Ray Kelley, another member of the Pilot Advisory Board.

"This way we are introducing a new concept to the public, gradually," Kelley said. "The critics might then see that it's not so bad."

Lavaera and Mike Nicely of the Federal Aviation Administration toured the proposed site on an information gathering trip and both approved of the proposed location.

Lavaera said the state should be better able to help aviation projects in the future since the passage of the Transportation Trust Fund on Oct. 7.

"We start accumulating money on Jan. 1 and by July 1 we should have a good idea of how much money will be available for local projects," Lavaera said.

Nicely toured the area with Lavaera, Prejean and project consultant Lucien Cutrera Jr. and they met with Gonzales Mayor Johnny Berthelot and local plant officials. They did not, however, have a chance to meet with people who live near the proposed site, Nicely said.