Council approves airport land sale

By CALVIN LEAR
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The Lafayette Parish Council narrowly approved the sale of airport land to Dependable Motors Thursday, apparently ending a three-year odyssey over what to do with the property.

The Federal Aviation Administration may challenge the terms of the sale, however, since the $700,000 sale price was lower than a last-minute appraisal of $775,000. The council’s vote was contingent on FAA approval, if it is needed.

The vote for the sale was 4-3. Daryl Schouest, Kathy Ashworth, Louis Benjamin and Lynn Guidry approved. Lenwood Broussard, Conrad Comeaux and Neal Burke opposed.

Proponents said failure to sell could force the dealership out of business, taking nearly 100 jobs with it. Broussard led opponents, charging the sale was a done deal up to three years ago and that the Airport Commission overstepped its authority.

Also, he cited a letter from the FAA, received Thursday afternoon, in which administrators said they would not approve the sale. Proponents say the FAA’s comments are based on conversations that took place long ago, and that the FAA will probably OK the sale once the terms are explained.

Dependable Motors is located on a triangular strip of land across Evangeline Thruway from Lafayette Regional Airport, which belongs to Parish Government and is under the direction of the Airport Commission.

The dealership has been rent-

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ing the land from the Airport Commission. Included in the terms for sale is a provision to subtract from the sale price all rent paid since June 1986 as of the closing date. The dealership, officially Acadian Fleet Leasing Inc., has paid about $185,000 in rent since that time; $4,500 a month the first year and $5,500 each month since. The $185,000 minus the $700,000 sale price means the final price will be around $515,000.

Benjamin said the council would be consistent with its pro-economic development stance of the past by approving the sale. "To cause the loss of 90 to 100 jobs is not economic development," Benjamin said.

Ashworth pointed out the council's past efforts at economic development, including the creation of enterprise zones and other mechanisms to help business.

"We have to look at this on a case by case basis," Ashworth said.

Guidry, who said he was concerned about selling parish property, said attorneys representing the dealership, the parish and the Airport Commission answered all the questions he had, convincing him to vote for the sale.

"I'd love to have a crystal ball that works backward so we all could see what happened leading up to this," Guidry said, referring to questions about whether the Airport Commission negotiated a deal the council had no choice but to approve.

Schouest said that after three years of often heated negotiations between the parish, the Airport Commission and the dealership, he was satisfied the sale should go through. He said the council did authorize the Airport Commission to negotiate the sale, "and they did.

"They've made a recommendation and I think we should have confidence in their evaluation," Schouest said.

Broussard was outspoken in his opposition, prompting opponents at one point to push for an executive session. Central to his argument was whether the Airport Commission sold the property - something only the parish can do, he said.

He said the terms of the sale were agreed to in June 1986 - an agreement to purchase was signed - and that the Parish Council had now been put in a position where it would face a lawsuit if it didn't approve the sale. Furthermore, in July 1987, the Parish Council passed an ordinance giving the Airport Commission negotiating power, but kept the authority to modify sale terms before final passage, Broussard argued.

"It seems to me we put the cart before the horse," he said. Councilors Comeaux and Burke said in principle they oppose the sale of any parish land, and therefore could not vote to approve the sale of the airport property.

That has always been my position," Comeaux said.

Also, Comeaux said he opposed the silent conveyance of mineral rights, since the rights are not mentioned in the sale proposal. In addition to giving up the mineral rights, the terms of the sale dictate that the Airport Commission retain the proceeds from the sale.

Parish President Walter Comeaux said he will sign the ordinance approving the sale.

In other matters, the council approved an ordinance to adopt the same platting fees for developments as is charged in the City of Lafayette.

Edmond Dupre, a surveyor, told of a client who had to pay $1,600 to the Planning Commission to get an address, because the commission required a plat. That, even though a plat was already on record at the Parish Courthouse, he said. "It's highway robbery," he exclaimed. "It's time for the powers that be to put an end to the exorbitant fees of the Planning Commission."

Actually, rural fees charged by LARC are the same charged by the old Parish and Regional planning commissions. City fees are subsidized by the Lafayette Government. LARC is currently working on all fees, said Lynn Guidry, the council liaison to the Planning Commission.

Also Thursday, the council deferred a vote on funding the position of public works director, and approved Greg Gauthreaux as parish recreation director.