Light-plane airport idea trying for takeoff again

By TIM TALLEY
River Parishes bureau

For the second time in six years, authorities are touting the benefits of a general aviation airport south of Baton Rouge. And like the first plan, which was crushed by a public referendum, the new airport proposal is running into turbulence.

The Ascension-St. James Airport Authority, a regional agency created by the Louisiana Legislature in 1984 and activated last spring, is studying five possible sites for a general aviation facility in Ascension and St. James parishes.

Aviation buffs maintain that construction of the airfield would attract new industry, stimulate the area's sagging economy and fulfill a longstanding need for a facility for privately owned light aircraft.

State and federal funds are available to build the airport but local tax dollars may be needed to operate it — a possibility that is not attractive to a growing opposition movement.

"Is the average citizen going to benefit from a general aviation airport in our area? I say, 'No, they're not,'" said Theresa Robert, whose home is beneath the flight path of a proposed airport site at Burnside, south of Gonzales.

"There's certainly a need for an airport," said Nicky Prejean of Gonzales, chairman of the seven-member airport authority. "It would be something new and something different. The airport looks more lucrative now as a business center than it did to me a month ago."

Prejean's agency needs between 160 and 200 acres of land for the general aviation airport. The facility would have a 5,000-foot, hard-surface, north-south runway and would serve single- and multi-engine aircraft.

The airport would not be used by large commercial airlines for air carrier passenger service.

Losing a general aviation airport in the region is not a new idea. Six years ago, Ascension Parish residents rejected a proposal to build an airport sponsored by Ascension and East Baton Rouge parishes.

A plan to locate the airport at Burnside was rejected in a December 1979 referendum that followed months of debate and confrontation between airport backers and opponents in Ascension who mounted a successful parishwide petition drive against the proposal.

The vote on the airport was 7,836 against to 5,437 for.

"I say the people have spoken," said Robert, who helped lead the opposition in 1979. "I say there's not a need for a general aviation airport."

The latest attempt to find a home for an airport produced a dozen proposals for sites in Ascension and St. James. The airport authority rejected all but five of them. The remaining sites are:

- A 200-acre section of the Riverton Plantation along La. 22 near Burnside, owned jointly by W.P. Wray Jr., E.A. Salassi, Dr. W. Gordon Peck, Dr. W. Shewen Slaughter, Eric Crake and Margaret Shuker. The price tag is $10,000 an acre for a total of $2 million.

- The IT Corp. property along La. 22 and La. 44 at Burnside, where the California-based hazardous waste management firm has proposed construction of the world's largest hazardous waste treatment plant. IT owns about 1,100 acres at the intersection and has offered to sell a portion for $9,300 an acre.

- Another block of property near the intersection of La. 22 and La. 44 at Burnside, owned by the Revere Copper and Brass Co. and the Olin Corp. The cost is also $9,300 an acre.

- Property owned by Crawford & Thibaut Inc. on Point Houmas on the west bank of the Mississippi River near Donaldsonville. The owners want $10,000 an acre, but the price is negotiable.

- Acreage in the St. Alice Plantation on the west bank of St. James Parish in the Welcome
community, the only property still under consideration is St. James. The only property still for sale for $337,000 is an acre site on Point Houmas.

Residents of Lecompte and nearby communities petitioned the airport authority to reject the Point Houmas site. The residents said they were concerned about the possibility of oil or gas. Officials at several area petrochemical plants are interested in participating in the airport project, he said.

"I definitely think there's going to be an expansion there. I think it could become a new industrial area for Ascension and St. James. It's a big numbers already," Prejean said.

The cost of the proposed airport is also in big numbers. Prejean has said the airport could cost $145 million. The site alone could run as high as $2 million and there will be additional costs for engineering, site preparation, and construction of the airfield and runways.

"In the Baton Rouge area, we've had a need for a general aviation reliever facility," Les said. He said local government operators have recognized that no local tax money would be involved. Operating the facilities should cost no more than $200,000 a year, he said.

"Basically, we're looking at cutting the grass," he said. The False River Airport in Pointe Coupee Parish, a general aviation facility similar to the one proposed in Ascension and St. James, operates on an annual budget of between $80,000 and $100,000, according to Manager Bruce Copps.

The airport records between 60,000 and 65,000 landings and takes off a year, and its aircraft are tied down or house in hangars of the airport.

All operating funds are generated locally from aviation-related fees and taxes. Prejean said state aviation money will be involved. Operating the facilities should cost no more than $200,000 a year, he said.

"We're not going to support it ourselves," he said.

Prejean said state aviation money will be involved. Operating the facilities should cost no more than $200,000 a year, he said.

"We're going to have some landowner willing to donate some tax dollars on than an airport," Prejean said.

"I don't think the average citizen will gain anything by it, and there's a good chance he'll lose something," Prejean said.

Prejean said state aviation money will be involved. Operating the facilities should cost no more than $200,000 a year, he said.

"Basically, we're looking at cutting the grass," he said. The False River Airport in Pointe Coupee Parish, a general aviation facility similar to the one proposed in Ascension and St. James, operates on an annual budget of between $80,000 and $100,000, according to Manager Bruce Copps.