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Last week, Standard & Poor's reduced the investor-owned bonds financing most of the Denver project to junk status.

"It looks like a disaster is pending when the first payments on the bonds come due later this year," said Louisiana Airport Authority member Herbert Burstein. "When Denver defaults on the bonds, it will hurt every airport that's in planning, including ours."

The major problem is that the city of Denver did not involve the airlines earlier in the planning process, said Greiner's Bruce Capps, the project coordinator for the proposed Louisiana International Airport and Transportation Center.

Denver began planning its new airport in 1986 and held groundbreaking in 1989. Only in 1990 and in 1991 did Continental and United Airlines, respectively, agree to locate at the new airport, Capps said.

"The city did not listen to the carriers" until they signed on, Capps said. "Most of the money ... and the bulk of the 19,000 change orders ... came as a result of that."

"We completed what we were responsible for to meet the March 9 deadline," Capps said. "The baggage system was not a project we were responsible for directly for."

"It seems like we're always rehashing this old issue, ... it think it is important that we go on and get it behind us," said Louisiana Airport Authority member Nick Baroni. "We don't want that stigma to walk through this project for the next 10 years."

Concerning the contract for the next phase, Louisiana Airport Authority legal counsel Kenneth Fonte defended his decision not to seek advisory opinions on whether Greiner could work on all phases of the project.

Last year and again last month, Burstein questioned whether state ethics statutes prohibit a firm conducting a feasibility study from continuing in the planning and construction of a project.

"I have seen some law that certainly indicates in other scenarios where that might be a concern. But under the circumstances of our case, there is no prohibition," Fonte said. "It's so clear to me that I don't see a need to take further action."

Fonte did not issue a written opinion, although he said after the meeting that he did have one written at his office.

When authority member Jimmy Reno asked Fonte why he did not seek a state Attorney General's opinion, Fonte answered that "ordinarily the attorney general doesn't like to get involved in issuing an opinion to a political subdivision" unless it's a matter involving a "close call."

When Fonte noted, Greiner's representatives disavowed any responsibility for the failure of the automated baggage system that is currently tied up in an indefinite delay in the Denver airport opening.

The firm also disavowed responsibility for the $200 million overruns which is helping inflate the Denver project from $1.9 billion to $3.7 billion.

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