Residents voice concerns about airport proposal

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More than 50 residents who live near the Baton Rouge Metropolitan Airport voiced their concerns to airport district commissioners Wednesday about a recommendation for airport expansion that could force relocation of 632 homes.

Commissioners spent much of their regular monthly meeting attempting to convince residents that their vote to receive the results of the airport master plan study from its aviation consultant did not mean the project would be approved or funded.

Director of Aviation Iray Ledoux said the vote allows the consultant, The LPA Group Inc. of Tampa, Fla., to pursue its recommendation by developing an environmental impact study, which would include a public hearing.

Residents were mixed on whether they wanted to sell their homes but many complained that news of the proposal already was affecting them, especially those who were trying to sell their homes to move.

“I put a $20,000 pool in my backyard,” said Ladd Johnson, a resident of Pleasant Hills subdivision for 12 years. “I’d never have done it if I’d known I’d be thrown slap out.”

Norma Jean Summers, a Sharon Hills resident of 30 years, added, “Our concern is not whether you accept or reject it today, but all of us have so much invested in our homes... what we need to know today is how soon could we expect to be approached, some type of time limits, what can we expect in the way of finances. All of this has to do with whether we should move or sell or remodel.”

The consultant in February outlined for an advisory committee its $219 million recommendation to handle congestion and overcrowding at the airport projected by the end of the decade.

The proposal included constructing a new runway that would require the airport to buy 432 acres of surrounding land and relocate residents, mostly in the Sharon Hills area, move Sharon Hills School and reroute a portion of Plank Road.

Commissioner James T. Benham, who cast the only vote against accepting the consultant’s recommendation, said the study “looked at a very narrow solution to the problem.”

Because 75 percent of the airport’s traffic is from general aviation, not commercial flights, a cheaper solution would be to move general aviation to another site, Benham said.

A site approved for general aviation exists in the extreme southwest corner of East Baton Rouge Parish, Benham said after the meeting. Owner T.P. Singletary is willing to sell for $6-$8 million, he said.

Benham displayed a list signed by 30 private plane owners as proof that “general aviation would move,” he said.

Gloria Peterson, who represented small plane owners on the commission’s advisory committee, complained that the advisory committee did not have “working meetings” to help LPA develop its recommendations. The advisory committee included airport, city-parish and chamber of commerce officials and the mayors of Baton Rouge, Zachary and Baker.

“I’m shocked,” Peterson said. “We’ve had two meetings with LPA and representatives of the commission where we were presented findings.”

At a meeting last fall, LPA presented historical data, she said.

At the February meeting, LPA presented the recommendation and asked advisory committee members to submit any response in writing to Ledoux, who would forward comments to LPA for inclusion before the commission meeting.

LPA associate Paul Pucklie said Wednesday that comments on its
findings could be made during hearings held in conjunction with its environmental impact study.

If the project is approved and funded, displaced residents would receive full-market value for their property plus relocation expenses, Pucklie said. Relocation would not come for 6-7 years, he said.

LPA’s recommendation calls for a $40 million renovation to the airport’s terminal to handle short-term congestion and would buy time for the airport to monitor airport traffic.

If traffic meets projections, LPA said the airport should construct the new runway parallel to its northwest/southeast runway and build a new terminal, either mid-field between the runways or west of the existing terminal.

Commissioner and District 1 Councilman Michael Babin, who represents area residents east of Plank Road, said his constituents could comment on the plan at a district meeting to be held March 29 at 7 p.m. at St. Pius Elementary School.