



# Briefings

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## Airport project development—from idea to award

How do airports best plan for their current and long-term needs? The joint Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) workshop on airport development, held November 5 in St. Cloud, Minnesota, provided a day-long opportunity for about 80 airport managers, owners, and consultants to access both airport agency staff and the required information for successful airport development projects. The event was the first of its kind in Minnesota, organizers say.

Cassandra Isackson, director of MnDOT's Office of Aeronautics, set the stage for the day's sessions by emphasizing the need to think "big picture" in terms of planning and development. "Often in our day-to-day work, the 'urgent' consumes so much of our time. It is imperative that we dedicate time to focus on the 'important'—our shared responsibility for successful implementation of projects that enhance and sustain Minnesota's aviation system, now and into the future," she said. "This workshop [is] just such an opportunity."

The opening session gave attendees a look at a "road map" document that outlines the critical processes, timeline, and milestones for a typical project. (This document is available on the AirTAP website at [airtap.umn.edu/events/workshops/process/2014](http://airtap.umn.edu/events/workshops/process/2014).) Andy Peek, assistant manager of the FAA Airports District Office (ADO), and Kathy Vesely, MnDOT Aeronautics assistant office director, walked through the process with attendees. St. Cloud Regional Airport manager Bill Towle also offered valuable insight, emphasizing how the steps and requirements could be optimized to

increase the likelihood of a smooth process. St. Cloud recently completed a crosswind runway project that involved a higher level of planning than the airport expected, he said. The airport is currently working on an extension of its main runway.

Airports can obtain money from the FAA through either 1) entitlements, which is the path most airports take, or 2) discretionary money, which is much harder to obtain, Peek said. He encouraged participants to think about how they could control the process, and how each could leverage and get the information to the FAA. The com-



Hangar construction

mon thread through the process is to "tell the story," he said. "Document what you are doing and why you need the project funded or permits awarded."

### Environmental considerations

Gina Mitchell from the FAA identified the connections between planning and the environmental process and described situations when the process falls apart during the environmental review. She also discussed key planning items critical to the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process, including identifying existing conditions

and facilities and having a completed airport layout plan (ALP) that shows the proposed development, aircraft operations, and enplanement forecasts and the airport's existing capacity to accommodate them, among other details. The primary reasons the process falls apart during the environmental review are:

- incomplete or outdated planning information
- poorly justified projects
- sponsor or consultant changes
- sponsor expectations not in line with agency requirements or timelines
- project drift from concept changes or inconsistencies
- changing project variables
- changes in FAA staffing and/or project oversight

FAA environmental protection specialist Josh Fitzpatrick explained that NEPA is an umbrella regulation encompassing many other federal laws. It requires agencies such as the FAA to integrate environmental values into their decision-making processes by considering the environmental impacts of their proposed actions and reasonable alternatives to those actions. NEPA comes into play when a project is partially or entirely funded with federal money, which then requires documentation, public involvement, and analysis and feedback prior to any decision making. Airport projects that trigger NEPA include new airport development, receipt of an AIP grant, use of passenger facility charge funding, land acquisition, some Part 150 measures, aeronautical flight procedures, and ALP updates.

The basic NEPA process includes early coordination with other agencies at the federal level, state agencies, and other FAA lines of business. To comply with NEPA,

**Workshop** continued on page 2

## An airport's story: Fosston Municipal

Located one mile from Fosston, Minnesota, the Fosston Municipal Airport sees an average of 23 operations per day—nearly 60 percent of which are local general aviation, while the rest involve transient general aviation.

The airport opened in 1946 and now covers an area of nearly 180 acres. The airport is publically owned and operated by an airport commission.

Along with general and transient aviation, the airport also serves training purposes for aviation students from the University of North Dakota, who practice touch-and-go landings on Fosston's runways.

Fosston is a rural town of about 1,500 people and is primarily an agricultural community. According to Fosston city administrator

Chuck Lucken, who also serves as the airport's manager, the airport serves the community by overseeing agricultural aircraft operations, including crop sprayers.

Lucken says that the airport has undergone a few major changes in recent years, including runway reconstruction and overlay, and the addition of a parallel air taxiway in 2012.

In the future, Lucken hopes to see the airport expand even more, both in size and in operations. He says the airport commission is currently working to obtain funding for more hangars on the property to allow private pilots to rent hangar space.

Lucken also hopes to see the runway lengthened in the future to accommodate larger aircraft operations.



the airport sponsor must provide detailed information on the activities to be conducted; wildlife locations, sites, species, and habitat to be affected; possible construction activities; and any other environmental considerations that may exist.



Panel discussion: advice for project formulation and development

A panel of seven agency staff discussed project formulation and the development process that occurs after planning and NEPA are complete. They agreed that having these steps completed does not necessarily mean that construction will happen in the following year. Land must be acquired, and permits must be in place. The FAA wants to award money that can be used quickly, said Chris Hugunin, FAA ADO.

Mitchell reminded attendees to identify early the land that will be required, and “make sure eligible costs fit within what you have.” In addition, an executed purchase agreement must be finalized before a grant is allowed, she said.

Vesely said that bonding may provide an additional source of funding, particularly for big terminal requests and for pavement rehabs. In fact, airports have used bonds to fund total replacement of pavements. Project language must be clearly worded, as bond projects can’t include lighting or anything other than the one approved category. She also discussed usable units of work on multiple-year projects. The State

of Minnesota may define a “project” differently than the FAA or MnDOT, and airports should work with their state elected officials to make sure to get the proposal right, Vesely said. Bonding money lasts for four years after the bonding bill has passed.

To maximize the use of federal funds locally in Minnesota, MnDOT will ask airports with entitlements that are going to expire to give them to airports that have “shovel-ready” projects. The agency will also be looking for funds that will be banked. If you have a project that you need money for, ask your regional engineer to add you to the list; MnDOT is keeping track of these projects by year and amount, Vesely said.

Fitzpatrick added that if more than three years have elapsed since your project was approved, the NEPA process may have to be reviewed to determine if it still fits, and if there are more or fewer impacts. For example, the age of infrastructure and buildings is based on a threshold, which may have been crossed during the delay. Or, critical habitat may have been added to a list.

“Mini sessions”

Other brief “mini sessions” led by MnDOT and FAA staff were held on the following topics:

- Passenger facility charges
- Airport layout plans
- CatEX
- Construction safety phasing plans
- Runway protection zones
- MnDOT project prioritization
- CIP collection
- Zoning
- Channeling Act
- Airport classifications
- Airport licensing and inspection

For more help

Isackson noted that two staff positions at the Minnesota Department of National Resources and Minnesota Pollution Control Agency are dedicated to helping MnDOT through the permitting process. If an airport needs help with an environmental issue, it should let the Office of Aeronautics know, since it’s possible MnDOT could one day hire someone to work full time on airport environmental issues, but not without the demand to justify it, she said. MnDOT also has “informed consent” training available to airports upon request.

The workshop was initiated by MnDOT Aeronautics and the FAA Dakota–Minnesota Airport Districts Office and facilitated by AirTAP. Workshop presentations are available on the AirTAP website ([airtap.umn.edu/events/workshop/process/2014](http://airtap.umn.edu/events/workshop/process/2014)).

Save the date: MN airports conference

Mark your calendar for the 2015 Minnesota Airports Conference, to be held April 15–17 in St. Cloud. The annual conference features experts in aviation and aerospace fields sharing their experiences in general assembly presentations, workshops, and open forums. Held in conjunction with the Minnesota



Council of Airports annual meeting, the conference also includes technical and safety presentations, an airport tour, an industry trade show, an awards and recognition program, and networking opportunities. Visit [airtap.umn.edu/events/airportsconference/2015](http://airtap.umn.edu/events/airportsconference/2015) for more details.

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