Lake Tahoe Airport master plan taking off

A master plan is being put together to guide Lake Tahoe Airport for the next 20 years. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

It's not a noise study. It's not a comprehensive economic study. It's not a study to do away with the airport. It's not a study to bring back commercial air service.

The master plan for Lake Tahoe Airport is a vision for the South Lake Tahoe airfield for the next 20 years.

As Councilman Tom Davis said at the start of the Feb. 13 meeting about the master plan, the airport has a "checkered history".

The 1992 airport agreement that was the result of multiple

lawsuits that involved the California Attorney Generals Office, League to Save Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency expired in October 2012. Because the environmental, economic and social fabric of the South Shore is not the same as 1992, the city opted to go forward with a comprehensive master plan for the airport. Plus, the FAA requires a master plan.

The FAA is funding 90 percent of the master plan at a cost of $315,000, with the city picking up 10 percent or $35,000. C&S Companies out of San Diego is the consulting firm doing the work.

Safety is the FAA's No. 1 priority for all airports. And because it is footing the bulk of the bill, it has the most say in what is studied.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has rules about noise in the Regional Plan, but they remain much the same as when the 1980 RP was adopted. There was talk when the latest RP was adopted in 2012 that noise would be addressed at a later date. That still hasn't happened. And it won't be looked at in the master plan.

While the economics of the airport will be considered, it is done on a limited basis. It won't delve into who regionally is benefiting or being hurt financially by the airport. Nor will it study the feasibility of having festivals or other events there. It's about the finances of the airport itself.

This was a bone of contention for some of the more than 100 people who attended the Thursday night meeting. Some people want a comprehensive economic study done. The city always has the option to do that at another time, for more money.

Several in the room advocated for closing the airport or keep it just for helicopter service.

To close the airport would require Federal Aviation Approval.

It would also mean the city would have to pay back the $27,462,036 the FAA has provided for improvements to the facility since 1999.

The city obtained the 55-year-old from El Dorado County in 1983 for $1. The city's general fund has been subsidizing the airport at a cost of about $400,000 a year. Half of that expense will go away after this fiscal year when the hangar debt is paid off.

Most South Lake Tahoe city offices are at the airport. This is saving the city roughly $100,000 a year in rent; what it was paying when offices were on Tata Lane.

On the flip side, if commercial air service were to return, those city offices would have to relocate.

City staff and councils have for years said they want commercial service to return. It hasn't happened since 2000. The peak passenger count was in 1978 at 294,000.

While there was a vocal contingent of people against the airport as it is today and adamant against expansion, many in attendance want a viable, thriving airport.

The FAA will have final say over the Forecast of Demand and the Airport Layout Plan. These are two documents that are part of the master plan.

The Forecast of Demand predicts future levels of service (operations) and the type(s) of aircraft providing that service.

Michael Hotaling with the consulting firm was repeatedly asked where the information was coming from to predict those outcomes. He didn't have a concise answer, instead differed to the company doing that report. But no one from that firm was in attendance.

The Airport Layout Plan is the other document the FAA must

approve. It will show existing airport facilities and provide a blueprint for future airport development. It also goes into safety issues and land use outside the airport.

Hotaling had mentioned the airport's being an environmental asset. When pressed to explain in what way, Hotaling said only in regards to providing a tarmac and fuel for planes fighting the 2007 Angora Fire and then as a staging area for planes working on slope stabilization post-fire.

Vehicle miles traveled to get to the airport or to the destination after landing will not be studied.

At least two more community meetings are planned regarding the master plan. Public comment would be taken at the City Council and TRPA meetings when approval for the document is sought, but by that time it's essentially a done deal. The final report is expected to be completed in January 2015, with it going for agency approval the next month.

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Notes:

• *Lake Tahoe News* did a three-part series on Lake Tahoe Airport in July 2012. Here are the articles — story No. 1, story No. 2 , story No. 3.

• Information about the master plan process will be on the city's website.