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Consultant: Oconee County Airport could be big money maker

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WALHALLA — A well regarded aviation consultant told the Oconee County Council this week that the county's small general aviation airport has the potential to become a major money maker.

Jay Talbert, a principal with Talbert & Bright Inc., said business at the Oconee County Airport is good and can only get better once runway extension is completed to give the airport its first 5,000-foot runway.

Talbert said 5,000 is the magic number for airports. He said airports with such a runway are cleared for landing big jets. Once a 600-foot extension project is completed in the coming years to give the local airport 5,000 feet of runway, Talbert said that would attract companies always looking for new places to taxi their corporate jets.

Pointing to a statewide economic study on airports in 2004, Talbert said airports with runways of less than 5,000 feet saw an annual economic impact of about $809,000. For airports with runways of 5,000 feet or more, Talbert said the economic impact spikes more than 720 percent to $6.7 million.

Oconee Airport Director Kevin Short also took part in the presentation to the council at a workshop hosted by the airport.



Jessica Nelms/Staff

According to an aviation consultant, the lengthening of the runway at the Oconee County Airport would open opportunities for greater revenue streams.

Short said that if the longer runway attracts 30 jets to the local airport, it would generate more than $28,000 in tax revenue for the county. He said there also would be greater demand for hangar rental.

As it is, all 40 hangars at the airport are full, and there is a waiting list of 60 pilots ready to move in, Short said.

On top of that, Short said, the big jets require more fuel — about 500 gallons — to fill up the tank. He said all that translates to more revenue.

"If we get 120 based aircraft, the FAA would talk seriously to us about putting up an air tower," Short said. "We want to be competitive and self-sufficient.

Talbert said he expects 10 to 12 companies to bid for the runway extension project. The Oconee Procurement Office set a deadline of Tuesday, July 7 to receive the bids.

The Federal Aviation Administration picks up 95 percent of the cost of doing the runway extension, which is expected to run into several millions of dollars. The other 5 percent of the costs is split between the state and Oconee County.

Talbert & Bright helped Short put together a $22 million wish list of projects in a five-year plan covering 2010-2014 that was submitted to the FAA to be considered for funding under the Airport Improvement Program.

"We won't get that much, it won't happen," Talbert said of the wish list. "It's one of those things where you at least have to ask."

Short said that the FAA has put off for the time being a request to have a fence put up to keep deer from the runway.