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Airport board has fulfilled duties

By Jonathan Westbrook, Oldham County Airport board Chair

For nearly four years now the Oldham County Chamber of Commerce, and subsequently the Oldham County Airport Board have been studying the feasibility of a general aviation airport in Oldham County as a potential tool to attract more economic development to Oldham County in an effort to reduce the dependence on residential property taxes for county income.

At the Feb. 3 Fiscal Court meeting, the Oldham County Airport Board's survey consultant presented the findings of their recent survey of Oldham County residents about their knowledge of the general aviation airport study and their support of its continuation.

The purpose of the survey was for the airport board to step away from the FAA-guided process of site selection and environmental impact analysis and determine without speculation the level of interest in the project across the county.

The goal of the survey instrument was to objectively determine if the study, funded by a Kentucky Department of Aviation grant, should continue to examine the impacts of economic development, property values and operating expenses, or if there was not interest in continuing.

The airport board was very pleased with the professional outcome of the survey. The response was significant, exceeded our goal for participation and 90 percent of the respondents were familiar with the project. The response was also balanced geographically and the demographics of the respondents very closely matched the demographics of the county. Based on this, the board knows we have reliable survey results that can be used as a basis for our decisions to move forward or not.

While there was a positive response to the potential economic impact of a proposed airport and an understanding that business development and job

creation were likely benefits, there was an overwhelming concern about environmental impacts.

From that more than 70 percent of respondents said they did not support an airport project and did not support continuing the study.

This addressed one of our final objectives, which was to have conclusive results that provided a clear direction for our board.

Based on the results of this process, the airport board voted unanimously to recommend to Fiscal Court that the study be ceased, remaining funds of about \$109,000 from the grant be returned to the Kentucky Department of Aviation and the Airport Board be dissolved.

This result, a clear next step, is something the airport board has been working towards with many obstacles for some time. There are many policies and a politicized process, not to mention limited funds earmarked for a specific use, that prevent the board from being able to study any issue it deems appropriate for our community. Initially the board was confined to the preset FAA process of studying a general aviation airport that includes no public survey and very little public input at all.

It took the board 18 months and a change in administration at the state level to gain the authorization to be able to use the funds to conduct a survey and know conclusively how to move forward. The airport board has fulfilled its duties of service to the county and is grateful for the opportunity to do so. As Oldham County's need to balance the tax base and relieve some of the burden from residential property owners and develop more commercial tax base persists, other economic development initiatives will have to be considered. But at this time, Oldham County will not pursue a general aviation airport as a viable option for commercial development.

Jonathan Westbrook is chair of the Oldham County Airport Board and a member of the Oldham County Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors. The views expressed in this column are those of the writer.