

Study vouches for necessity of regional airport to serve growth

Officials push for next step: choosing location for facility

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FLORENCE --Local politicians called upon one another to figure out where to put a regional airport after a study released Friday said the area would need such a facility if passenger growth continues at the highest projected rates.

Even if the area studied - which included Florence, Myrtle Beach and Wilmington, N.C. - grows at the lowest projected rates, it will need new or improved airport facilities, according to the long-awaited study of the feasibility of a regional airport conducted by Wilbur Smith Associates.

A regional airport would take 18 to 20 years to build and would operate alongside the three other airports in the region, including an expanded Myrtle Beach International Airport, officials said.

"We need to immediately focus on phase two, on what location and where we would build this facility," said Sen. Yancey McGill, D-Kingstree, chairman of the executive committee of the North Eastern Strategic Alliance, a public-private economic development group that requested the study. The \$340,000 study was paid for by the Federal Aviation Administration.

The study said that Myrtle Beach International Airport would probably see 3.2 million to 6.4 million passengers traveling in and out by 2026.

The study estimated that a regional airport would cost more than \$484 million in today's dollars to build on nearly 3,500 acres, though a Wilbur Smith official cautioned that this was likely a number that would rise.

"In all likelihood, with the way construction and petroleum costs are escalating, that number is probably low at this point," said Barbara Fritsche, senior vice president with Wilbur Smith. "Unless oil comes down for some reason, that price is not going to come down."

Liz Gilland, chairwoman of Horry County Council, said the area needed to buy the 6,000 acres needed for the airport and additional industrial space now.

"If we don't find it now, in five or 10 years there's not going to be a site big enough if growth continues," said Gilland, who recently announced she will run for state Senate. "Everyone tells us that air flights in the future are only going to continue to increase. If

this past year is an indication, they're going to increase quicker than anyone has expected."

The Myrtle Beach International Airport had a record year in 2007, carrying more than 1.68 million passengers in and out.

A regional airport would complement the existing airports in Myrtle Beach, Florence and Wilmington, rather than replace them, officials said.

They said there is still a need to expand the Myrtle Beach International Airport, which is working toward building a new terminal or expanding the current one.

Though local representatives have been arguing the need for a regional airport for years, state and federal representatives and studies have not always agreed.

The FAA's program manager for South Carolina, Parks Preston, attended the study presentation Friday at Francis Marion University and said that while he still needed to read the study, at first blush he was not convinced by the conclusion.

"I would question a fourth commercial service airport," he said.

Preston said the FAA would comment on the study within 30 days.

Also, a state Aeronautics Commission plan that only looked at runway capacity did not find a need for additional facilities.

The Wilbur Smith study included air traffic, area growth and terminal facilities.

The study also said that the area is probably not prepared to handle international flights. Most international carriers want to use runways that are 11,000 feet long, and the longest runway in the region, at Myrtle Beach, is 9,500 feet long.

Gilland said she wants her council and local residents to hear a presentation of the study at a meeting in April.

A regional airport could be located between Myrtle Beach and Florence, possibly in Marion County, by the path of the proposed Interstate 73, McGill said.

The biggest obstacle will be funding, he said.

McGill estimated the facility could cost between \$500 million and \$750 million to build.