

Officials Hone in on Walla Walla Airport Master Plan



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The FAA required plan will identify ways the regional airport will evolve over the next 20 years.

A more than yearlong master planning process for the Walla Walla Regional Airport has taken off.

Consulting firm Mead & Hunt has embarked on a more than half-million dollar planning process that identifies strengths and weaknesses to ultimately create a guiding document for the airport for the next two decades.

During a Port of Walla Walla meeting Thursday, representatives will present the three commissioners with an update on what they've gathered so far and what's ahead.

The meeting begins at 6 p.m. at the Port's administrative office, 310 A St.

Mead & Hunt's presentation is one of several expected to take place in the next year and a half as work unfolds. It will also follow a two-hour meeting earlier in the day with a Planning Advisory Committee identified to help provide input. That committee is made up of local representatives of general aviation, tourism, planning, business and the Port.

The “Airport Forecast” focuses on the future of commercial and general aviation operations and how they will affect infrastructure requirements. That piece is one of two components in the master plan that requires approval by the FAA, said Walla Walla Regional Airport Manager Jennifer Skoglund.

The agency requires plan updates every 10 to 15 years; Walla Walla’s last one was in 2002.

The plan enables airport officials to identify projects for 20 years into the future. It also identifies undertakings for which the airport would be eligible for FAA funds.

The cost of the master planning at this point is \$565,418. A majority of that — about 92 percent — is covered by the FAA. The remaining more than 8 percent is divided by the Port and a Washington State Department of Transportation grant. Each of those sides pays \$22,956.

A first meeting in November identified what Mead & Hunt refers to as SWOTs — strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.

Among the strengths: the abundance of World War II-era facilities and infrastructure, ease of access, developable property, free parking, development-friendly zoning, growing economy and airline passenger growth.

The weaknesses include a lack of airline competition and single destination service; responsiveness to aircraft fuel availability; not being a full-service fixed based operator; the Port’s focus on return on investment; winter fog and its impact on flights; and full T-hangars.

The opportunities include a chance to attract aviation businesses, develop a fee structure that differentiates between aviation and non-aviation operations, a desire for a California commercial flight destination, and air traffic control tower services.

Identified threats include a need for more than one aircraft mechanic, a need for new business buildings at the business park, the ability for operators to build or own buildings versus leaseholds, and lack of private investment into new hangar development, among other things.