

Jobs, quality of life at heart of airport issue

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By Wayne Peal
staff writer

It's jobs vs. quality of life as Wayne County's airport campaign heads into its final weeks.

County officials and members of an ad hoc homeowners group are each tugging at the sleeves of county voters, who will decide the fate of \$100 million in airport expansion bonds during the Tuesday, Nov. 6, election.

County officials back the airport bonds, saying they're a major step toward keeping the area's economy competitive.

"There are a lot of jobs at the airport and most of them are good-paying jobs," deputy county executive Michael Duggan said. "We'd hate to lose them."

THOSE WHO oppose the bonds say a bigger airport will destroy the area's quality of life, even if airport noise is reduced.

"It's more than just noise, there'll be traffic problems and other problems, too," said David Esper, the Dearborn attorney heading Citizens Against Airport Noise. The ad hoc group whose petitions put the bond issue on the ballot.

County officials are counting on union members, Duggan said. The deputy executive recently met for

two hours with representatives of 22 unions.

"We're not just meeting with airport unions, there's a lot of other people, including hotel workers, whose jobs depends upon the airport," he said.

THE COUNTY is quoting figures showing Metro providing 50,000 jobs and pumping \$2 billion a year into the local economy. Modernizing would produce at least \$400 million more, county officials said, though expansion foes dispute those figures.

Business leaders are also included in county campaign plans. Duggan has met with several business groups, including the Canton Economic Club, in trying to whip up support.

The anti-expansion group is taking its case directly to the people. Group members distributed flyers door-to-door several weekends ago. Esper has also been meeting with homeowners groups. A major pre-election meeting is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Monday, Oct. 15, at the Livonia Civic Center Library.

"What we're saying is that we want to preserve the area's quality of life," Esper said. "If people are leaving our area, it's not because we don't have an adequate airport. It's because they found a better quality of life somewhere else."

That statement represents a slight shift in strategy. Initially, the debate

centered on noise from Metro jets, rerouted earlier this year.

THE NEW routes forced jets to rise more steeply — rattling windows in Dearborn, Livonia and other nearby communities.

Smaller corporate jets, flown in and out of Metro by Big Three automakers, add to noise problems, Duggan said — especially in revving their engines while on the ground.

Since noise complaints first surfaced, the county has appointed a "noise czar," formed a study group, sent County Executive Edward McNamara to Washington to speak with federal officials and, ultimately, reopened dialogue with the Federal Aviation Administration — all in hope of lessening the noise problem.

IT TOOK a Freedom of Information Act request, filed by the county, to get the federal government interested in changing Metro flight patterns.

"By filing, we were able to get a 'footprint' of noise," Duggan said. "What it showed us was Metro is as noisy as anywhere in the nation."

While county and FAA officials continue to discuss the situation, revised flight patterns aren't expected until after the election is over.

County officials are also meeting with owners of corporate jets, Duggan said.

IF THE debate has broadened to include quality of life issues, it's also turned into a debate on whether Metro, or satellite airports, should handle new flights.

"The area could be better served by spreading the flights around," Esper said.

That's not the way to go, county officials respond.

"The fact is Metro is already here and it already has the capability," Duggan said.

THE \$100 MILLION in bonds to be voted upon are 1/10th of a bigger expansion project.

The \$100 million issue includes \$14.3 million local money for a fourth north/south runway, as well as an estimated \$25 million for water retention ponds and a \$38 million parking structure.

Ironically, the bond issue also includes about \$2.2 million for an anti-noise berm. Other costs include nearly \$20 million in interest payments, reserve funds and bond-issuing cost.

Bond fees are paid by airlines using Metro. The county levies no airport tax.

AMONG PROJECTS not financed by the issue:

Federal money has already been assured for a new east/west runway. The runway is expected to be completed within two years.

Work on a new airport access road is expected to begin next year. The new road, designed to serve western suburbs, is expected to be completed within four years.

The project's centerpiece, a new terminal, awaits approval from Northwest Airlines, the airport's biggest commercial carrier.

Though county officials worry Northwest will cut back on its Metro operations if voters reject the \$100 million bond issue, the Minnesota-based airline hasn't announced any post-election plans.

IF THE bonds fail, county officials said, they likely wouldn't reappear before voters until the next county election in 1992 — if at all.

Because of its estimated \$1 million cost, a special election isn't considered likely.

Initial county polls showed traffic as the public's biggest airport concern, Duggan said; new polls show it's noise.

Compounding the situation, at least for the county, is that many people in areas not even affected by Metro flights also express opposition to the bonds.

"Our polls show us Grosse Pointe is anti-expansion, but people downriver are more supportive," Duggan said.

COUNTY OFFICIALS regard the election as a struggle.

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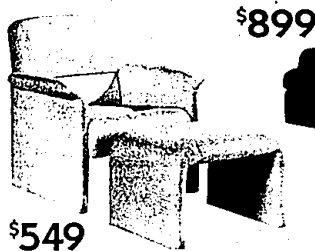
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