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Mukilteo loses key round over Paine Field's growth

Regular flights up to airlines, panel says

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EVERETT - A 1970s pact between Snohomish County and communities surrounding Paine Field can't be used to limit passenger flights at the airport.

That's the conclusion of a 188-page report released Thursday on the work of the panel that met last year to discuss Paine Field's future.

On the other hand, the report notes, the county, which owns and operates the airport, is under no obligation to encourage or woo airlines to start passenger flights.

And airlines, if they want to use the airport, can be required to foot the bill for any improvements and detrimental effects, the report concludes.

"The most important thing is that the community, after 30 years, is operating on a consensus on the facts," County Executive Aaron Reardon said Thursday.

Reardon created the 12-member committee of local government officials in 2005 to review the decades-old agreement that discouraged commercial air service at Paine Field.

The move came in response to an uproar sparked in Mukilteo and other south county communities by a 2002 county economic study that proposed regular passenger service at the airport.

Elected officials and residents in Mukilteo, Lynnwood and Edmonds said passenger service would damage those communities with increased noise and pollution.

County business leaders say allowing airlines to use the airport could bring jobs and new business.

The committee met 12 times in 2005 and 2006, the last time in December.

The three conclusions were never voted upon, but rather came through the committee's research into federal law.

The report released Thursday, which includes copies of the 1970s pact, meeting minutes and members' statements, makes no recommendations from there.

"It does provide a historical perspective, but it's inconclusive whether the county should pursue or accommodate scheduled air service," said Everett Mayor Ray Stephanson, who was co-chairman for the panel.

Stephanson and business leaders on the panel occasionally showed frustration with the group's work. They wanted a decision on passenger service, while Reardon stressed that the panel's mission was simply to establish the rules that guide the issue.

The report "speaks for itself," panel member Mark Wolken said Thursday. Wolken is owner of Mark Wolken and Associates, an Everett land-use consulting firm.

"I don't know if there's anything to comment on," he said.

Wolken and Stephanson acknowledged that stopping short of a recommendation on passenger flights, the report reflects the work of the committee, whose diverse members ultimately agreed to disagree on that issue.

Roughly half the members, including most of the government officials, oppose commercial air service, while most of the business leaders support it.

Not only did the group disagree on passenger service, the members could not agree on whether to update the old pact. Rewording was proposed, but members never voted to ratify it.

Three of the business people, including Wolken, called for the agreement to be scrapped. They suggested allowing airport policy to be set by government planning processes.

Most of the elected officials on the panel wanted to keep the agreement, contending that despite its legal shortcomings it could be rewritten and still used as a tool to discourage passenger flights.

Former Mukilteo Mayor Don Doran, who served as the panel's other co-chairman and opposes passenger flights, said he was encouraged by the report's conclusion that airlines could be made to pay for airport expansion.

"We don't believe (the airline industry) has shown justification for any kind of subsidy given the negative impacts of their doing business," he said.

County Council Chairman Dave Gossett said Thursday he hadn't had a chance to review the report. The council will likely discuss it at an upcoming work session, he said.

Reardon said the report spurs no immediate need for action. He said it can be used as a reference point for airport policy in the future.

He said his position has always been, and remains, that the county should not pay to market the airport or to build improvements to support passenger service.

The report, he said, "strengthens our position in making sure a private carrier would pay for infrastructure costs, if one decides to come to Paine Field."

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