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New rule for Paine Field plans

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Herald Writer

EVERETT -- The Snohomish County Council voted Wednesday to force County Executive Aaron Reardon to take a stand on any airport projects he sends their way, a move he called purely political.

The change would give taxpayers a clearer idea of how decisions are made regarding commercial air service at Paine Field.

"The one thing we want for the surrounding community is to ensure that there are no surprises," said Councilman Brian Sullivan, a former Mukilteo mayor and longtime opponent of opening the airport to commercial passenger flights.

Reardon said the ordinance changes nothing. The council already has instructed his office to negotiate with potential air carriers and give them direction on building a passenger terminal.

"I'm indifferent," Reardon said of the council's decision. "I think what they've done is paint themselves into a corner trying to placate both sides on this airport issue and they're trying to find a way out."

Until now, the executive could mark "no recommendation" on any airport proposal his office sent to the council.

Reardon said his office would not propose something that it didn't support. The only time he would be likely to signal disapproval would be for something that originated with another elected official's department, he added.

The only public comment before the council's 4-0 vote on Wednesday came from Don Doran, also a former Mukilteo mayor and president of Save Our Communities, a group that opposes passenger service.

"It's the right thing to do. It keeps the issue in the light of day," Doran said.

Councilman Dave Gossett was absent Wednesday. Before the vote, Council Chairman Mike Cooper repeated an earlier promise to hold public meetings before making any important decisions on Paine Field.

The change comes three weeks after the council directed Reardon to continue negotiations on two polarizing issues: talking to Horizon Air and Allegiant Air about starting scheduled commercial service, and building a county-owned passenger terminal.

Both issues remain under discussion, Reardon said.

For Sullivan, opposing commercial flights at Paine Field has been a decades-long battle. The new ordinance wasn't a jab at Reardon, he said.

It will affect any new building projects at Paine Field, he said, no matter who is county executive. "It has everything to do with good policy," Sullivan said.

The executive and a majority of the councilmen say they don't want to see passenger flights at Paine Field. However, they claim they cannot stand in the way because doing so puts the county at risk of losing tens of millions of dollars from the Federal Aviation Administration.

The county uses the federal money for runway repairs and other airport work, which keeps Boeing's operations running smoothly.

Greg Tisdell, one of the leaders of Fly Paine Field, a group that wants passenger service, said Wednesday's resolution changes little. The group's message to the council remains the same: Don't do anything that could jeopardize the FAA funding.

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