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Tensions rise over airport pact in Owls Head

By Stephen Betts | Nov 17, 2020



There was opposition voiced at a Nov. 16 public hearing by the Owls Head selectmen on a proposed interlocal agreement with Knox County, concerning the Knox County Regional Airport.

OWLS HEAD — Tension was thick as pea soup at a public hearing Nov. 16 in Owls Head for a proposed new agreement between the town and county over growth at the airport.

By the end of the meeting, selectmen said residents will get to decide whether to approve the interlocal agreement at a special town meeting scheduled for 6 p.m. Monday, Nov. 30.

Forty-five people turned out for the Nov. 16 public hearing held in the lower level of the Owls Head Community Building. Participants wore masks, but physical distancing was difficult due to the number of people and the size of the room.

Resident Jared Schmelzer, who has organized an effort to stop the proposed agreement, criticized it sharply during the meeting. He maintained Knox County is breaching the agreement and that the proposed agreement would weaken, if not remove, the town's ability to control future growth at the airport.

Schmelzer said he was concerned an expansion of the airport would harm the quality of life for residents in Owls Head.

Other residents urged selectmen to end the public hearing and postpone the special town meeting, because it was not safe to hold the meeting in the community building room.

"There are a lot of emotions. Let's take the pressure off the March deadline," resident Ken Wexler said about holding off on the town meeting. He suggested the county give the town a 90-day extension to work on a new agreement.

Wexler said if the current proposal goes before the town meeting, it will be defeated. The current interlocal agreement was approved in 2001 by the town and Knox County Commissioners and expires June 2021. The county noted, however, the agreement requires 90 days notice if it is not to be extended.

Selectman Gordon Page pointed out that selectmen have not adopted the plan, but negotiated a proposed one that is going before voters.

Airport Manager Jeremy Shaw said the Federal Aviation Administration requires a change in the agreement from the current one. He said he doubts the FAA would agree to a 90-day extension.

The proposed new agreement, Shaw said, recognizes the FAA's authority, and creates a joint board made up of representatives of both the County and the town to deliberate actions taken by the airport in the coming years.

"Without the passage of the proposed interlocal agreement, the county would most likely issue a 90 day notice to terminate, as articulated in the current agreement, because it is not compatible with current FAA guidelines and would place the airport in violation of grant assurances it has made over the last 15 years with the Airport Improvement Program," the airport manager said prior to the meeting.

Schmelzer said the FAA may have say over the airport, but not over the town.

Knox County Administrator Andrew Hart said he is not aware of any expansion plans for the airport. The major project that was recently approved is for a solar farm on county property, which he said will benefit all communities in Knox County.

Shaw said there were no plans to add "one additional inch" to any of the airport's runways.

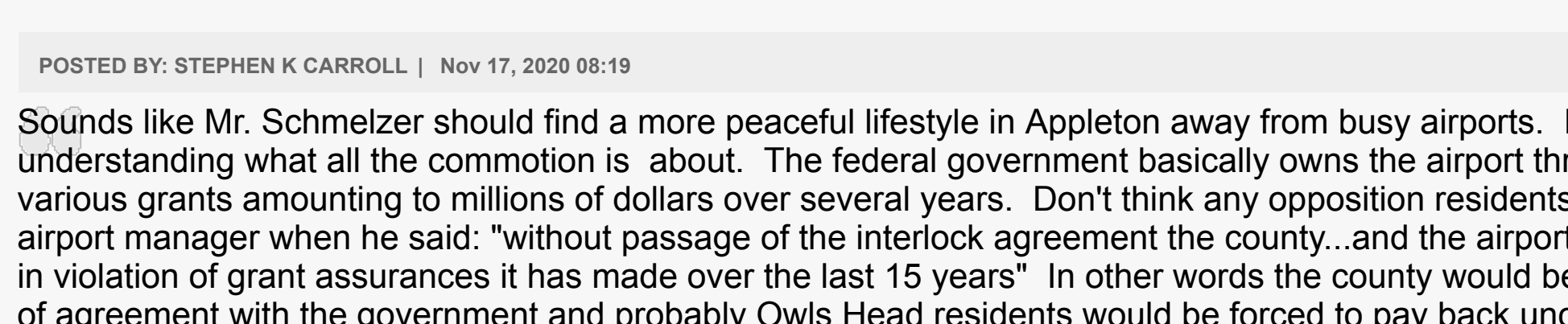
"We see that in the recent guidance from the FAA stating that barring any special circumstances, the FAA will no longer consider improving runway 3-21 under the FAA's AIP program. They have decided that it's important for an airport to have at least one runway, but it's not necessarily the taxpayer's responsibility to maintain every runway surface at an airport that has multiple runways," the airport manager said.

Shaw said that weeks ago, the report suggested to the Owls Head Transportation Museum that it list a piece of property for sale with a real estate broker. He said the property was discussed at the last Airport Public Advisory Committee meeting as a piece of property that was inside the airport's perimeter fence that had hangars, and a taxiway that could benefit the airport in the future for a potential maintenance facility on the airfield, as well as a flight school.

He said no action was taken, but it was recommended by the APAC to form a task group to look at the possibilities for airport use, should it come to market.

Schmelzer interrupted county speakers on several occasions. Owls Head Selectmen Board Chairman Tom VonMalder repeatedly warned the resident not to interrupt the speakers.

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Comments (7)

POSTED BY: JARED SCHMELZER | Nov 19, 2020 11:41

In response to Mr. Stephen K Carroll, This a major quality of life issue for residents of Owls Head and the sounding towns' residents as well. The County is in breach of the Interlocal Agreement. That's a good point you highlight. The County accepted numerous grants during the standing agreement that is a legal and binding agreement in purpose to simply not to expand and grow the Airport without mutually including the voting residents of Owls Head. Expansion and Growth with increased commuter and larger flight operations to come in the near future most directly affects Owls Head in numerous and negative ways.

Now that the County has been 'allowed' if not enabled, the County and the FAA wish to remove Owls Head Residents as an obstacle for expansion and growth by citing reasons of future compliance. The differences between the standing Interlocal Agreement and the proposed changes should not be 'comfortable' to anyone that can read the current and proposed and understand the differences.

Oh, and as I pointed out at the meeting the County voluntarily accepted funding not our Town, and its absurd on its face to suggest that Owls Head would be forced to do anything such as you suggest, pay it back. (Did the County ask you to say that? It sounds scary, but flawed and misleading.) Owls Head is not against the County sustaining and maintaining the airport. Owls Head is concerned about further growth and expansion of the airport and as agreed in our pact, the County and FAA should not be devising ways to get around the Town. The airport is in Owls Head most directly affects Owls Head, and the Town residents want a meaningful Agreement not one that 'shuts them up'.

Appleton sounds nice, but Owls Head is a Town worth fighting for. Jared Schmelzer

(Also, there were more than 50 residents that showed up to the hearing at 3pm, when people are still working traps and before many residents are even thinking of punching the clock. Some residents arrived, before and after the meeting started, looked in from outside and saw there was no room to enter and comply with meeting requirements, so they stood in the cold then left. I could see them from where I was standing. There were many requests sent to the Selectboard from OH residents for a more appropriate place to gather comfortably with the ability to be heard and ask questions. The Selectboard denied those residents' requests but made sure their lawyer was there to hear all, well on the phone anyhow.)

POSTED BY: STEPHEN K CARROLL | Nov 19, 2020 09:11

Mr. Swartzbaugh, no I have not read the interlocal agreement, but I believe the Airport Manager has and he stated there would be certain consequences if the agreement were broken. You objected to my comments re: possible penalties, but you did not say you believed them to be incorrect. Re: my statements concerning quality of life, many regional airports throughout the U.S. are surrounded by Golf courses, bike and walking trails and fit nicely into the community. I, like many others enjoy watching planes in flight and often attend the Owls Head museums fly-ins. I do not believe the Airport is this horrible monster and would love to live in Owls Head as I could save considerably over my Rockland taxes.

POSTED BY: FRANCIS MAZZEO, JR. | Nov 19, 2020 08:34

I don't live in Owls Head but I don't think changes at the airport are necessary. When a jet flies near my house to land it is sometimes quite frightening. I don't always see it but the fear of it landing in my living room becomes a thought.

POSTED BY: LAUREN SWARTZBAUGH | Nov 18, 2020 17:31

Mr. Carroll - As your comments make quite clear, neither were you present at the Public Hearing nor have you read the Interlocal Agreement - a current, binding contract between Owls Head, the Airport and Knox County since 2001. Per your admission, you are "not understanding what all the fuss is about" actual obligations and recourse between Counties, Towns and/or the "Federal Government" in the event of a breach of a binding Agreement.

Your perspectives here are somewhat surprising given your 10/12/16 commentary to the Village Soup regarding the importance of quality of life in a town... "and the way to do that is to work on the ingredients that this town has that are attractive to people... parks, harbor trails, walking trails... these are all things that people really want". It would be of interest to hear from readers if the expansion of their community airport into a regional / commuter / or charter jet hub would be an "attractive" aspect in their process of choosing one community over another to which they relocate their family, to start an organic farm, or fulfill a dream of opening a B&B.

There's a stark difference between our community airport as we know and love it now, and what it will become under the proposed revisions to the Interlocal Agreement being set forth by the County. A suggestion to heed the advice you rather ineloquently presented to Mr. Rosen and educate yourself with factual information and a true understanding before making commentary on an issue of which you seem quite uninformed.

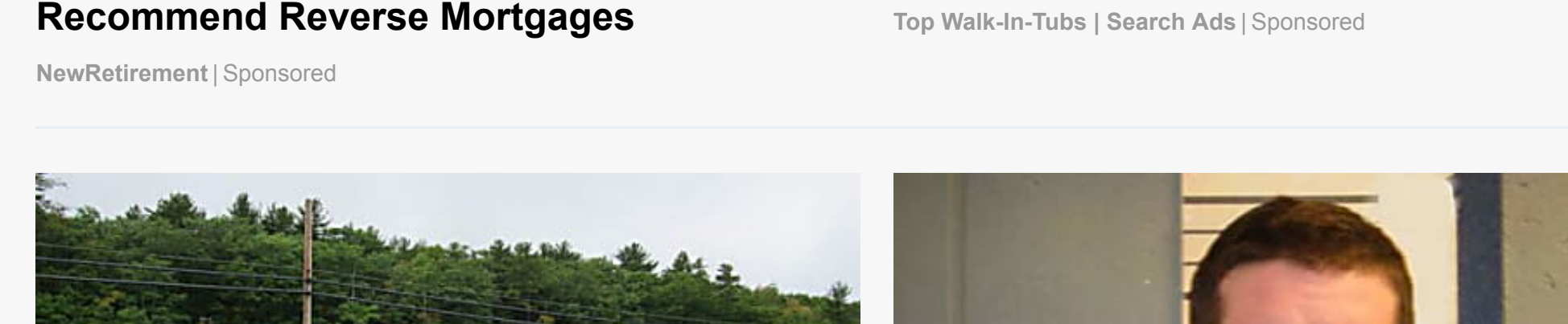
POSTED BY: STEPHEN K CARROLL | Nov 17, 2020 14:02

Mr. Carroll, you state above "...and probably Owls Head residents would be forced to pay back uncle sam the millions in grants." Is this speculation or fact? Please share with the rest of Owls Head residents your source of information in making such a statement.

POSTED BY: STEPHEN K CARROLL | Nov 17, 2020 08:19

Sounds like Mr. Schmelzer should find a more peaceful lifestyle in Appleton away from busy airports. I am not understanding what all the commotion is about. The federal government basically owns the airport through it's various grants amounting to millions of dollars over several years. Don't think any opposition residents heard the airport manager when he said: "without passage of the interlock agreement the county... and the airport would be in violation of grant assurances it has made over the last 15 years" In other words the county would be in breach of agreement with the government and probably Owls Head residents would be forced to pay back uncle sam the millions in grants. Don't think that would make Mr. Schmeizer very popular in town. Think it would be fair to say that Owls Head should shut up and "take the deal"

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