

Statement - Jack Meagher for the Dare County Pilots group  
Dare Co. Commissioners meeting 3/20/06

I appreciate the opportunity to address the County Commissioners and I thank Chairman White for putting us on the agenda.

I am speaking for a loosely-knit group of pilots at Dare County airport. Some are relatively new to aviation. Others have been flying for many years.

The purpose of my appearance is to tell you, as gently but as candidly as possible, why we pilots oppose transferring any addition airport land to non-aviation, non-airport use. Specifically, we oppose the plan to turn over "up to 40 acres" of land along the western boundary of the airport to the Coastal Studies Institute.

We have nothing against CSI. It's a creature of the University of North Carolina. As we pilots understand it, CSI would do marine science, monitor the environment of the ocean and coastal areas and advance education in these disciplines.

Who could oppose that? Certainly not the pilots at Dare County airport! It is an excellent idea! Where we see the problem is the fact that the land at issue is encumbered by a deed restriction which mandates its use only for aviation-related purposes. Laudable as it is, CSI's mission is not an "aviation-related" purpose.

There is another concern - or two:

The first is sparked by the colorful brochure - published by the architectural firm which has designed CSI. It talks glowingly of what is described as the "campus" that would be built on the site and how folks who drive through the gates will be impressed by the beautiful buildings and grounds.

Just what would we have - if CSI were built?

Informal and unofficial conversations with other folks indicate that the CSI operation would involve comparatively few people - a dozen or so PhDs and some grad students. The speculation is that the operation would require substantially less than 40 acres...perhaps less than half that. I have seen one estimate that the CSI buildings would have a lot coverage of 35% of the 40 acres. That's less than 15 acres.

So, why is it proposed to grant "up to 40 acres?"

Setting aside that much land begins to make sense if - as some of the more paranoid folks are supposing - if the real plan, is - in the fullness of time - to create the the University of North Carolina - **Manteo division!**

That could be a real shock, not only to the 18 homeowners who now live along Old County Road - across the street from where CSI is proposed - but also a shock to the town of Manteo which justifiably would be concerned about the impact of additional traffic and demands on its infrastructure from a UNC-Manteo.

The second concern is precedent. It has happened before! Twice in the past 30 or so years, the Dare County Supervisors have seen fit to take airport land or aviation-designated land for other projects. The first was the aquarium. The second project was the Dare County jail. The airport is not a land bank - but it appears as if the County has acquired a habit of using it as such.

I am in regular contact with George Speake, the former Dare County Airport Director. He has some rather strong feelings about the proposed land transfer and freely gave me permission to quote him.

In part, Mr. Speake said:

***It still makes me very mad, as I know that Dare County Regional Airport could grow and become a truly great General Aviation airport for the east coast. If the County would put half of the effort into the airport that they are putting into this school, imagine how nice the airport would be. In twenty years, someone is going to be scratching their head, wondering what in the world Dare County did to their airport.***

A year ago, he wrote a memo laying out some of the facts of the proposed land deal for CSI. I have given each Commissioner a copy, but let me emphasize some of the points his memo makes:

- (1) The land - totaling 3 parcels - was deeded to the County by the Navy and Interior Department in 1947.
  - (2) The deeds require that the 3 parcels are to be used for aviation purposes only.
  - (3) Three years ago, the Airport Layout Plan showed the potential to build “numerous hangars” in the proposed give-away area.
  - (4) Since the land has been part of the Airport Layout Plan for many years, the FAA considers it “airport property for airport use.”
  - (5) Every time the airport is provided a Federal grant, ( Dare County is) required to sign documentation stating that we will do everything we can to protect our airport property and insure that it is being used for the purposes stated in the Airport Layout Plan.
- Mr. Speake thinks this current project may well violate the Federal Grant Assurances signed by the County.

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There is also the issue of money. Maybe lots of money.

This give-away of airport land could be very costly for Dare County.

What is the market value of this 40 acres? The FAA says the land must be appraised....and they say the value of the land that is disposed must stay with the airport.

One local banker I talked to thought 1-million dollars per acre was not unreasonable.

Does the county, the state or CSI have the potential millions to reimburse the airport for “up to 40 acres?” Or, would there be an attempt to cook up some sort of land-swap designed to avoid any cash changing hands?

We do not yet know whether this land give-away to CSI will fly or crash and burn. Rick Barkes, the manager of Airport Development for the North Carolina DOT is charged with the job of formulating the proposal which would be submitted to the FAA for approval - or disapproval.

Rick has told me - as recently as two days ago - that he is nowhere near ready to write up a proposal.

So, we wait.

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George Speake has another thought - about what *could* be the airport's future:

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***Maybe it is time for the airport to break away from the County entirely. Everyone used to say that the airport could not support itself and that is why (it) stayed with the County. I firmly disagree. There are a lot of "nice things" that could be cut from the budget there, including some staff, that would make it possible to be self-sufficient.***

***It would take a hard nosed manager who would only spend the basics, but it is possible.***

***The annual budget there (at Dare County airport) is \$1.2 M, my budget here (Garden City, Kansas) is only \$630,000.***

I should note that Garden City Regional airport has runways that are substantially longer than Dare County's and has commercial airline service - again, with a budget half as large.

Many of the our pilots' group think some of the long range improvements for Dare County airport should include:

>Extension of runway 23 into the sound by at least 2,000 feet. (You may recall that former Airport Authority Chairman Bill Plyler had his head handed to him when he made that suggestion a year or so ago - but it's still something that ought to be done - if only for safety reasons!)

>The extended runway could form part of a breakwater for seaplane operations. You might say, "Well, there isn't any seaplane activity!" That's correct...because it's very difficult, here, for seaplanes. There's no dock for them and refueling from the truck requires a high-wire act. Visit Alaska and you'll see how seaplanes are an *industry*.

>The County ought to work with the U-S military to find a way to construct instrument approaches which pass through the R5314 Restricted Area. Presently, R5314 is often listed as "active" even when there is no military activity within it.

I have seen figures indicating that the Dare County airport adds - one way or another - nearly 8 million dollars a year to the local economy. It could be lots more - if the airport is brought up to date - *and if its land remains intact*.

Thank you for listening.

From George Speake 3/30/05

To all,

I think some of you may be aware of what George Wood is referring to, but probably not all.

When the Department of the Interior and the U.S. Navy deeded the airport to the County of Dare, it was deeded in three parcels. One was deeded as airport property and restricted to airport use only. The other two (of which the 40 acres is one) were deeded as County property with an aviation deed restriction. This means that the property can only be used for aviation purposes.

Historically, the airport has maintained all three parcels of land and as such has shown all three of the parcels on all Airport Layout Plans (ALP) since at least 1962. A recent update prepared in 2003 showed the potential to build numerous hangars in this area.

Therein is the first of many problems. By being included on our ALP for all of these years, the FAA considers that land to be airport property for airport use. So much so, that each and every time the airport is provided a Federal Grant, we are required to sign documentation stating that we will do everything we can to protect all airport property and ensure that it is used for the purposes stated in our ALP.

By the County proposing to provide this property to the Coastal Studies Institute for a non-aviation institution the Federal Grant Assurances, agreed to by the Airport Authority, may be in jeopardy of being violated.

The Airport Authority has expressed concern to many about the loss of the 40 acres; however, the ultimate decision on transfer of ownership lies outside of the realm of control of the Airport Authority. County, State, and Federal officials (to include the FAA) will ultimately decide if the aviation deed restriction can be lifted and if the property can be transferred to a non-aviation entity.

If anyone needs further clarification on this matter or has any additional concerns, please let me know.

George Speake  
Airport Director  
Dare County Regional Airport