

# AUBURN AIRPORT

## Summary

The Auburn Airport is owned by the City of Auburn. It provides many benefits to area residents. Among these are emergency helicopter services, aircraft and facility availability for business and pleasure and landing accessibility in the event of inclement weather elsewhere. In the past several years there has been a growing controversy regarding airport management and control. The Grand Jury has examined the situation and interviewed principals familiar with the airport.

Several issues were identified through this investigation:

- There is a lack of clearly defined roles for groups and individuals involved with the airport.
- There are differing attitudes toward regulations and responsibility.
- There is a need to review the airport fee structure.

Under City Ordinance, the City Council has the final responsibility for all facets of airport operation.

The Grand Jury has three recommendations regarding airport issues.

## Discussion

The Auburn Airport has been in existence since before World War II. It was a small but important aviation link for the County. Originally there were intersecting runways, but the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) determined that both runways could be used only if the airport had a control tower. The persons then responsible for airport management concluded that usage did not warrant a control tower and closed one of the intersecting runways. At about that time, ownership of the airport was transferred to the City of Auburn. An Auburn Airport Committee was formed by the city and given the responsibility of airport administration and operation.

The abandoned runway land, approximately 40 acres, was transformed into an industrial park. Income generated from the park was deposited over the years into the Auburn General Fund. This was contested and the City, working with the FAA, agreed to transfer approximately \$580,000 into a fund reserved for airport needs.

In 1997, the Auburn City Council commissioned an outside consulting service to examine airport operations and to prepare a comprehensive report with recommendations. This report was presented in May 1997, and several of its recommendations were adopted. As a result, the Auburn Airport Committee was dissolved and replaced by a seven person Auburn Airport Commission with each of five persons to be appointed by one of the five Council members and two persons appointed

by the Council as a whole. At least four of the Commission members must be residents of the City of Auburn. The Council also stipulated that the Commission was “to serve in an advisory capacity to the City Council, City Manager, and Airport Manager on matters related to the Auburn Municipal Airport.” The City Council retained ultimate responsibility for all facets of airport operation. The Council also created a position of Airport Manager, that reports to the City Manager and acts as Secretary to the Commission.

A group of airport users, primarily pilots and former members of the defunct Airport Committee and associated airport business operators, formed a social club know as the Auburn Airport Association. To enhance its influence, some of the Association members formed a political action group variously known as “Friends of the Airport” or the “Auburn Airport Association Political Action Committee.” This group has been vocal in working to influence decisions regarding airport management and the structure of fees for use of airport facilities.

Growth in the Auburn area has led to increasing use of the airport for both recreation and business. This has raised questions as to the equity of user fees and long-term leases for airport businesses. In some cases, FAA regulations contain stipulations about such fees and leases. Investigation reveals that the current fee and lease structure is not consistent with comparable airport facilities in the area. In addition, some users who operate aviation-related businesses outside of airport property are seen as paying less than their fair share of airport expenses. These issues have become sources of dissension between members of the City Council and the Airport Commission.

## **Finding 1**

The Auburn City Council has the ultimate responsibility for governing all facets of airport management and operation, with the Airport Commission only in an advisory capacity. The City Council has been tentative in exercising this authority.

## **Recommendation 1**

The City Council must assert its authority or amend the ordinance to specify otherwise. Failure to assert control allows opportunities for individuals to exercise personal agendas.

## **Finding 2**

A lack of clearly defined roles has led to misunderstandings and mistrust among the airport user groups, the Auburn Airport Commission, the City and airport management.

## **Recommendation 2**

The City Council must clearly define management structure in the best interests of the City and the airport and then ensure that the defined structure is followed. This would include making it clear to whom the Airport Manager is responsible and to whom the Airport Commission is responsible.

## **Finding 3**

The Auburn Airport, while financially solvent, has long-term leases and other user fees lower than those of comparable airport facilities.

## **Recommendation 3**

The Auburn City Council should direct staff to make a study of comparable airports such as the Lincoln airport to determine appropriate charges and fees. As leases expire and new contracts are negotiated, equitable rates should be instituted. In accordance with FAA regulations, reasonable fees should be established for all airport users including those with aircraft entering from businesses operating outside airport fences.

## **Respondents**

Auburn City Council  
Auburn City Manager  
Auburn Airport Commission  
Auburn Airport Manager

## **RESPONSE REQUIRED WITHIN 90 DAYS TO:**

The Honorable Larry D. Gaddis  
Presiding Judge, Superior Court  
County of Placer  
Historic Courthouse  
101 Maple Street  
Auburn, CA 95603