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El Dorado airport oversight still up in the air

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Arguing that it is time to assign oversight of activities around the county's airports to a local agency, members of the El Dorado County Transportation Commission may seek the additional title of El Dorado County Airport Land Use Commission.

Kathryn Mathews, the transportation commission's executive director, said county airport manager Dave Nicolls had asked the commission to consider taking over the responsibility from the Auburn-based Foothill Airport Land Use Commission.

Mathews said the Foothill panel, which also serves Placer, Sierra and Nevada counties, supports the transfer of duties, as does the state Department of Transportation's Division of Aeronautics.

The proposed shift is driven in part by the need to update land-use compatibility plans for the Cameron Park, Georgetown and Placerville airports. Mathews said the plans are the oldest in the state, and the Foothill Airport Land Use Commission is not prepared to undertake the updates.

She said Caltrans representatives estimated the total cost of updating the plans for the three airports would be \$80,000 to \$100,000, 90 percent of which would be funded by grants.

Transportation commission members voiced concerns last month about potential liability associated with the new role.

Reporting to the commission last week, Mathews said the commission's counsel, Nancy Miller, indicated the most likely issue would be a claim of inverse condemnation. Mathews said Miller recommended that the commission purchase insurance to cover potential liability if it took on the new role.

Austin Wiswell, a Rescue resident and retired chief of Caltrans' aeronautics division, said there is a misconception that airport land-use commissions make decisions about land use. "They do not approve or disapprove anything," Wiswell said.

In the case of the airports in El Dorado County, the commission would make recommendations to the Board of Supervisors or Placerville City Council.

An advisory panel's exposure to liability would be considerably less than for a decision-making body, Wiswell said. He argued that El Dorado officials should be in "the driver's seat" when it comes to issues involving local airports.

An airport land-use commission's job is to protect people and property around airports from excessive inconvenience and noise, he said.

"You can have things around airports," Wiswell said. "You just have to be careful how they're built."

The commission has to protect airplanes from bumping into things, like towers, poles and tall buildings, and from lights that could interfere with a pilot's vision, he said.

"You have expertise by virtue of your proximity to Mather (Airport)," Wiswell said, referring to El Dorado County residents' complaints about noise from low-flying cargo planes bound for the Sacramento County airport.

But Bill George of Swansboro, a pilot and former member of the El Dorado County Airport Commission, said experience was a concern.

"I think expertise is critical," George said, adding that he had been involved in efforts to prevent development under the flight path for the Placerville Airport.

Art Marinaccio of Shingle Springs said the land-use compatibility plan for the airports would have to correspond to provisions of the county general plan and would require involvement of the Planning Department.

Commission Chairman Jack Sweeney said a land-use compatibility plan is not really a land-use planning document, but a plan based on air space and sound contours.

If someone doesn't update the plans, he said, the county's airports likely will be in violation of state requirements.