

The Truth Concerning Airport Improvement

I heard today from a local business person that Ravalli County Airport was going to become an International Airport! I asked where he had heard that information and he said he read it in the newspaper in "Letters to the Editor". To be an international airport the Ravalli County Airport would have to have customs available for people entering into the United States. The same business person said he also read 747s were going to land at Ravalli County Airport. The smallest 747 takeoff weight is 755,000 lbs. Can you imagine what would happen to a Boeing 747 if it attempted to use a runway stressed for 17,000 lbs single wheel and 25,000 lbs dual wheel? I also read where an aircraft already hit the high school and next was the lab and the Daly Mansion! Get the picture? Just because it is printed in the newspaper doesn't mean it's true.

Ravalli County Airport does not meet FAA Safety Standards for those aircraft currently using the airport today. Airport improvement does not mean it will accommodate bigger, heavier, nosier, and faster aircraft. The runway for the past 50 years was built to handle aircraft weighing up to 17,000 lbs single wheel and 25,000 dual wheel and when and if a new runway is constructed it will be constructed to accommodate aircraft weighing 17,000 lbs single wheel and 25,000 lbs dual wheel, not Boeing 727s, 737s, or 747s.

Let's investigate the subject of taxes, specifically the Real Property Tax Statement. On the right hand side of this statement is a list of where this money is spent. Please notice "Airport" is not on the list. Not one cent of that tax money goes to the airport contrary to what you may have read in the "newspaper". Where does the money come from for airport improvement? Like the highway trust fund which pays for the building of highways, bridges, and such there is an aviation trust fund to pay for airport improvements and/or in some cases a whole new airport. The federal and state taxes on fuel fund the federal and state highway trust funds. Same for the aviation trust fund. There is federal and state aviation fuel tax plus a ticket tax for those people who don't fly but instead ride in an aircraft. All this money goes into the aviation trust fund. Currently the FAA pays 90% of airport improvements from this fund. The remaining 10% is the county match but in the past Montana Aeronautics has generously chipped in 2 ½% from the state aviation trust fund leaving the county responsible for only the remaining 7 ½%. Since the citizens of Ravalli County don't pay for the airport, where does the money come from to cover that last 7 1/2%? On the past projects the county borrowed the money from Montana Aeronautics requiring the airport pay off the loan from its revenues. The county has taken the money from the airport budget. Also, individual donations and the Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation have donated the money for the county match.

The Ravalli County Airport actually reduces the tax non-flying Ravalli County citizens pay! How does that happen? Each hangar owner pays real property tax which adds up to approximately \$35,000 in total. Aircraft registration fees go into the county general fund of approximately \$15,000. Yes, it is not a lot of money but what other county asset pays back money to the county? There have been times when the airport needed some of the money back via an Operating Transfer for the airport to pay its bills and loans outstanding but with the airport improvement comes more hangars and more revenue to the county and airport.

What happens if the county fails to bring the Ravalli County Airport up to FAA Safety Standards for the aircraft currently using the airport? The FAA will quit funding Ravalli County Airport which means the Ravalli County tax payer will pick up the bill. Since 2001 the FAA Aviation Trust Fund has contributed over \$3,000,000 to the airport to keep it properly maintained. That is an average of \$231,000 per year. The \$150,000 match money for that \$3,000,000 was split between the state aviation trust fund, people who donated, and Ravalli County Airport. **KEEP IN MIND RAVALLI COUNTY TAX PAYERS WERE NOT TAXED FOR THESE IMPORVEMENTS.** If the FAA no longer funds the airport improvements the Ravalli County tax payer would necessarily pick up the bill to keep the airport open.

What happens next? The FAA has quit funding the airport except for the new environmental assessment (EA) to determine the feasibility of a new alternative called 4B. There was a public meeting scheduled 18 Jun 2014 which was the next step in the process for completion of the EA. This public meeting was to be held to take comments from the citizens of Ravalli County concerning the Environmental Assessment (EA). These comments are to be answered by the engineering firm doing the study and then sent to the FAA for their review. If the FAA found more work needed to be completed, it would be accomplished. If not, the FAA would sign off the EA and it would be complete. So to summarize, the FAA has stopped all funding except for this one small grant for the update on the EA and the FAA will continue not to fund the airport unless the county agrees to bring the Ravalli County Airport up to FAA safety standards. We are asking for a grant now to fix our aircraft parking area in anticipation of commissioners implementing Alternative 4B. We hope it will be forthcoming.

Alternative 4B moves the runway 400 feet east, 1550 feet north and makes the new runway 5200 feet long which the FAA recommends as safe for 100% of the aircraft now using our airport. It will move the runway away from the populated areas located to the south and east. A majority of the traffic pattern will be on airport property. A 5200 foot runway will allow the fire fighting aircraft to take off with a full load of retardant, 800 gal vs. 600 gal. The new runway keeps the load bearing capacity the same as the old, 17,500 lbs single wheel and 25,000 lbs dual wheel. This does not allow bigger, faster, heavier aircraft to land at Ravalli. The Ravalli County Aviation Safety Foundation has pledged to pay the county's match so **IT WILL NOT COST RAVALLI COUNTY TAX PAYERS TO IMPROVE THE AIRPORT.**

Think about it, the same people who didn't want a four lane highway from Hamilton to Missoula are the same kind people who do not want to make this runway safe for 100% of the aircraft using our airport today. Do you drive to Missoula? These people didn't care about your safety and they don't care about the safety for those people using our airport.

Economic impact: A Montana Aeronautics commissioned study found the airport contributes 14 million dollars yearly to Ravalli County. An updated study this year ultimately will show this number be much higher.

Support Ravalli County Airport!

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