

**Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities  
Birchwood Airport Master Plan (AMP) Update:  
Stakeholder Advisory Group (SAG) Meeting #2 – NOTES**



October 12, 2021; 1:30 – 4:00 pm

**Participants**

- Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF): Jessica Wuttke-Campoamor (Birchwood AMP Project Manager), Shawn Gardner (Anchorage Area Planner)
- Federal Aviation Association: Jonathan Linquist, Carley Wallace
- Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association: Rob Stapleton
- Birchwood Airport Association: Lars Gleitsmann, Abe Harman, Della Swartz
- Birchwood Community Council: Val Jokela
- Eklutna Real Estate Services LLC/Eklutna, Inc.: Ron Pollock
- Talon Hangar Association: Dennis Serie, Mike Morelli
- Airport users: Jeff Banks (glider pilot), David Swartz (hangar owner)
- Project Consultants:
  - HDL Engineering Consultants: Mark Swenson (Consultant Project Manager), Heather Campfield
  - Agnew::Beck Consulting: Shelly Wade (Public Involvement, Land Use and 3P Lead), Aubrey Wieber

**Project Overview – Slides 5-12**

- We are here to determine how to best serve the needs and interests of the aviation community, Alaska Department of Transportation and Public Facilities and other stakeholders, including adjacent landowners.
- We are on track to finish this project in Summer 2022. We will start drafting a plan in early 2022 and will hold a third SAG and Public Meeting.
- Since we last met, we have completed an Aviation Activity Forecast, a Financial Assessment, a Land Use Assessment and Frequently Asked Questions.
- We would like SAG members' feedback on the latest progress and advice for our upcoming Public Meeting.

**Financial Assessment – Slides 13-22**

- This product was completed by Northern Economics, Inc., in close partnership with DOT&PF.
  - We internally have some unanswered questions from the Financial Assessment.
- All profits from all DOT&PF airports go into a general aviation fund, that funds maintenance and operations for all DOT&PF airports, with an emphasis on access to communities off the road system.
- This full report is on the project website.
- The airport is and has been profitable.
  - Revenue grew 36.5% from 2017-2020.
  - 70% comes from lease fees, 25% come from tie-downs and parking and 5% comes from fees and fuel permits.
- Expenses have ranged over the years, but were higher in 2020, with more than \$100,000 in “Capital Outlay and Facilities.” We are still learning what this is.
- Birchwood had 10,259 operations in 2020, but that number is misleading, as it does not include “touch-and-go landings”. The airport is still getting higher use than that number would reflect. With touch-and-go landings, it is about 67,000 operations per year.

## Discussion

- **Lars Gleitsmann:** In Birchwood, the operations are mainly private aircraft and training aircraft. When the weather is good, you often have four planes in the area doing touch and goes. That is somewhat similar in Wasilla and Soldotna, but you also have a lot of commercial use in those facilities.
  - **The project team will consider adding touch-and-go operations to the presentation.**
  - **The project team will try to get a better breakdown of costs going forward.**
- **David Swartz:** The airport is much more active than the 10,000-landing figure would imply. It is likely that these do not include touch-and-go landings. Birchwood is a lot busier than Wasilla is, and these numbers do not indicate that.
- **Jeff Banks:** Could you include more airports in the benchmarking exercise?
  - **Mark Swenson:** We looked at comparable airports where the way the airport is managed is closest with Birchwood. They did review Palmer information but decided to not include it.
- **Jeff Banks:** I am concerned about how much is being spent on cutting grass in the infield. It only gets cut once or twice per year. That needs to be included in the expense. It creates visibility issues.
  - **Mark Swenson:** We can pass that information along.
  - **David Swartz:** It would be good to get a better sense of how grass cutting is accounted for.
    - **Mark Swenson:** We are limited by how well DOT keeps data.
  - **Lars Gleitsmann:** I have never heard of anyone complain about grass in the infield in 25 years.

## Land Use Assessment – Slides 23-30

- Land use plans for the airport and surrounding lands continually state the land should be maintained for existing uses.
- The 67 lease lots and 119 tie-downs are generally all occupied. We have repeatedly heard that pilots would like additional lease lots and tie-downs.
  - **Lars Gleitsmann:** There was a repaving and the number of tie-downs were lower after. How is that reflected in these numbers?
    - **Mark Swenson:** I do not know how many tie-downs were there before paving. There are additional tie-downs on lease lots, but these are DOT tie-downs.
- We have talked with adjacent landowners to see how their future plans could impact the airport and its users.
- There are specific features (Cook Inlet, railroad) that make expansion in most areas difficult. The most feasible area for expansion is on Eklutna, Inc. land to the south.
  - This does not mean Eklutna, Inc. is trying to sell this land. This is just the most realistic option for expansion.
  - **Jeff Banks:** Have there been any noise complaints? Is there any thought of noise mitigation?
    - **Shelly Wade:** We have not received any direct commentary on this.
    - **Val Jokela:** The most I have heard in Community Council meetings is that everyone supports current operations. They would not support the airport going to commercial operations.

## FAA Framework and Context – Slides 31-33

- FAA's goal is to follow the local airport's plan.
- FAA policy does dictate how federal funds can be used.
- The FAA conditionally approves the Airport Layout Plan.
  - Approval does not guarantee funding for any specific project.
- FAA funds get dedicated through the Airport Improvement Program.

- Historically, \$214 million gets spent annually in Alaska.
- Birchwood generally earns \$150,000 in funds.
- Needs within the system can exceed available funds.
- Money is mostly going into pavement and infrastructure right around the runways, as well as safety things like fencing to keep wildlife out.
- For FAA to fund improvements, it needs to be eligible and justified by non-government demand.
  - **Rob Stapleton:** Have you seen new environmental regulations that might affect the Birchwood Airport?
    - **Jonathan Linquist:** Not that I am familiar with at the federal level. At the state level, there is an emphasis on soil contaminants, but that is largely about firefighting aircraft and is likely not an issue for Birchwood.
  - **Rob Stapleton:** There is a push for electric everything in some states. It wouldn't surprise me if there is a push for electric aircraft, and so it might benefit the airport to do some electrification.
    - **Jonathan Linquist:** I have heard of that push in other states. That isn't really an environmental driver, but rather it's driven by new technology.

### **Aviation Forecast & Alternatives – Slides 34-44**

- 80% of activity is made up of training operations.
- No changes in type of use are forecasted.
- We are forecasting additional tie-downs and lease lots.
- **Lars Gleitsmann:** The recording device was in use during the rainiest part of the year, so there is less aviation activity. If the recording had been in late June and early July, it would have seen maybe three or four times the activity.
- **Abe Harman:** There is a lot of aircraft at the airport that is not ADS-B (Automatic Dependent Surveillance-Broadcast) aircraft. Was there a way to account for that?
  - **Mark Swenson:** I believe this did pick them up, and it would have been able to pick it up based on radio frequency. It was a fairly small number.
  - **Jessica Wuttke-Campoamor:** Yes, if the pilot called out their tail number on the radio or turned their lights on, it would account for that.
  - **Lars Gleitsmann:** Alaska also has a surprisingly high number of aircraft without radio.
- We have prepared three alternatives, which are mostly centered around treatment of the gravel ski strip location.
- We understand everyone appreciates the ski strip, but in the FAA's eyes, it has some issues. It is in the middle of Taxiway A.
- All alternatives are in line with critical aircraft needs, which is a requirement for FAA funding, so that means bringing runways and taxiways in line with critical aircraft needs.
- All alternatives will address the need for new apron spacing.
- Due to the volume of comments we received on parking and toilet facilities during stakeholder outreach, we have included those things in the alternatives.

### **Alternative One**

- This includes a new gravel runway that meets the 700-foot separation requirement.
- To do this, we need to acquire Eklutna land to the south.
- This reconstructs Runway 02L/20R to shorten it and make it narrow, which aligns with critical aircraft needs.
- This includes a reconstruction of Taxiway A and moving the gravel runway.

- This relocates Taxiway C to provide access to the threshold of 20R.
- This constructs new Taxiway F.
- There is a new Taxiway S, parallel to the ski strip.
- This includes new lease lots in the southeast corner, along with transient parking.
- The northeast apron includes extending tie-downs as much as is possible.
- This configuration retains an area that can be used for tie-downs in the summer but would be used for snow removal storage in the winter.
- This alternative tries to fit the access road to the south of the airport.
- This includes a fixed pilot briefing structure.
- It removes the fence from the south side of the airport and includes a new fence further to the south.
- This is the “Cadillac” version of the alternatives.
- Pros: This meets FAA requirements for runway separation, removes in-line taxiways to improve airport safety, allows for expansion of leasable lands and apron space, could allow for separate traffic patterns for simultaneous operations and removes apron and hangar areas from within RPZs.
- Cons: This requires FAA headquarters approval to improve or move the ski strip.
  - Simultaneous operations could be a bad idea.
  - **Jonathan Linquist:** If you permit simultaneous operations, it increases the capacity of the airport system itself. If you keep the configuration as such where there is just one runway, it does not increase the capacity of the airport.
  - **Rob Stapleton:** What about traffic patterns this looks like a formula for collisions and communications issues...

### *Alternative Two*

- The main difference for Alternative Two is the inline taxiways are being removed and the gravel ski strip is staying in the same place.
- There would not be a parallel taxiway on the east side.
- We would still need to acquire land for future development, such as more tie-downs and lease lots.
- This includes the reconstruction and relocation of several taxiways.
- A lot of the changes are like what is proposed in Alternative One.
- Pros: This alternative improves safety and allows for growth and maintains the current runway operations.
- Cons: This does not meet FAA separation requirements (this might not be a deal breaker for FAA funding), future runway improvements would not be AIP eligible, this would not have a taxiway on the east side of the airport. Additionally, the runway placement could create a confusing sight picture for pilots who are unfamiliar with the airport.
  - **Jonathan Linquist:** The multiple different types of surfaces is really unique to Alaska, so it is confusing for FAA headquarters in the Lower 48. However, I have been told that if we have a type of aircraft at the airport that requires a different material, that could be eligible. They would not review this until the project is proposed.

### *Alternative Three*

- This configuration is like what you see in Wasilla and Palmer.
- It is like the other alternatives in that it allows for future lease lot expansions.
- It provides vehicle parking spaces at the different aprons.
- The main change is it would improve Taxiway E, construct Taxiway F and relocate Taxiway C. It would relocate Taxiway A 40 feet to the east.

- This option provides a gravel ski strip and taxiways on both sides of the runway.
- Pros: Removes in-line taxiways to improve safety, allows for growth, gives clear visuals to pilots and provides parallel taxiways on each side.
- Cons: It doesn't meet FAA parallel runway requirements and requires FAA approval.
  - This isn't necessarily a deal breaker for FAA funding.

### Discussion

- **Rob Stapleton:** Alternatives One and Two seemed to have some safety issues in terms of the patterns. I am having some issues with the southeast area right next to the railroad tracks. Mostly, I am just concerned with the flight patterns.
  - **Mark Swenson:** I agree. The patterns would be a change and difficult. It could create conflict for floatplanes coming off nearby lakes.
- **David Swartz:** Alternative Three is the best.
- **Abe Harman:** Alternative Three is most practical.
  - **David Swartz:** I am curious about the north end on Alternatives one and two if there is room for an instrument approach?
    - **Mark Swenson:** It would change the threshold on that side. The idea of an instrument approach has come up minorly, but not loudly. We are curious how important that is.
    - **David Swartz:** For practice purposes, it is a good runway, and could be good to practice instrument approaches, but isn't a huge deal.
    - **David Swartz:** I wonder about runway overruns ending up with airplanes interacting with vehicles. This hasn't been a problem, but it does sometimes come up.
    - **Mark Swenson:** These alternatives would allow for more room.
- **Jeff Banks:** The runway is kind of skinny for long-winged gliders. If it was going right to grass or old asphalt, that would be fine, but it is going into runway lights, and I don't know what that spacing would be.
  - **Mark Swenson:** Usually lights are 10 feet beyond the edge of the runway. If additional width on the runways is desired, that could be brought up during plan design.
  - **Jeff Banks:** We don't use lights during the summer months. Maybe they could be capped from April to October, which would allow for gliders to come in and not clip the lights with the wings.
  - **Mark Swenson:** There could be precedent for that, but I am not aware of it.
  - **Jonathan Linquist:** I also am not aware of that happening. How often do you operate?
  - **Jeff Banks:** In the summer, there is one guy who operates daily.
  - **Jonathan Linquist:** The threshold to consider a specific type of aircraft is 500 operations per year.
  - **Jeff Banks:** There might be 250 operations.
- **Lars Gleitsmann:** I am appalled by the runway narrowing and shortening and trying to pitch it as a safety benefit. The width of runways is a huge safety feature. It helps planes from crashing. The FAA is making runways always smaller and narrower, and it's an abomination to me. The length and width of these runways has been a huge safety feature for teaching how to fly tail-dragger planes.
  - The glider operations have always been a positive element at the Birchwood Airport and narrowing the runway would make that unsafe.

- If we moved further to the east, we likely would start to get noise complaints from neighbors. Right now, only ultralight planes are flying over the east. Other planes are flying in over the ocean.
- **Mark: Swenson:** Everyone is frustrated with not being able to keep the runways wide. These are only in the event of a reconstruction project. These are not proposed imminent changes. These are unfortunately the reality of FAA funding.
- **Denny Serie:** On Alternative Three, when you are using straight skis, you go straight from the ski strip to ski parking. If you move the ski strip, you have to get on a taxiway. Starting in January, that would make it difficult for straight skis.
- **Abe Harman:** All three plans show pretty major expansions to the south. Are we also going to evaluate any scenarios of not changing the layout and what the implications of that would be? The current layout works well.
  - **Mark Swenson:** There is a “do nothing” alternative that will be considered as part of the Master Plan. If the FAA determines the separation between runways isn’t a big dealbreaker, that is big. But, if you do leave it exactly how it is, you will never get FAA funding for maintenance on the gravel ski strip.
- **Abe Harman:** Alternative Two doesn’t address moving the taxiway to the far east boundary.

### **Next Steps and Wrap Up – Slides 45-48**

- Please share these slides with your representative groups.
- Please attend the second public meeting on October 27, which we want to be an interactive discussion.
- We want everyone to be able to share comments, whether written or verbal.
- This meeting will be virtual.
- After the second public meeting, we will have a survey to understand levels of support for the different alternatives.