

Public Hearing on the Port of Coupeville's Potential Purchase of the AJ Eisenberg Airport

I would like to thank everyone who attended the public hearing about the AJ Eisenberg airport. The meeting drew over 50 community members, and the Port Commissioners are grateful to the 32 participants who spoke. Comments were very thoughtful and informed, and we are thankful for the public input!

Pretty much everyone agreed that our county needs a safe and efficient airport. We are the only county in the state of Washington that does not have a municipal airport. While there were differing opinions on who should own and manage the airport, and why – we are confident that a sustainable solution will be found.

To those who could not participate in the public hearing, we'd like to share some important points that the Port Commissioners would like the community to know. This is not the first time the island community has turned to the Port to help keep an important asset in public management. When the Port assumed ownership of Greenbank Farm, it was to prevent the sale to a private party that would have developed the land. When the port purchased the historic Coupeville Wharf, it preserved the last standing icon of the Mosquito Fleet era.

There is some misinformation that has circulated and was even presented during the hearing. First, the Port has express authority to own/operate an airport outside its boundaries under RCW 14.08.030. It was brought up that we would need a communication plan, as well as check other boxes. This is only required when the Port would begin developing land. If the Port was to purchase the airport and plan to develop it, we would be required to go through the communication plan of RCW 53.08.450.

Another misconception is that the Port would use its newly acquired Industrial Development District (IDD) funds to purchase the airport. The Port cannot utilize IDD funds to purchase property. Those funds are to be used for capital improvement projects only. Under public ownership, airport funding sources could include the FAA, the rural county economic development fund, WA Dept of Transportation, among others.

Several speakers expressed their concern that delays in improving the airport could threaten the long-term viability of Whidbey Island.

Some of the benefits citizens cited include:

- The airport helps address public safety issues and the challenge of rural medicine and emergency care
- In the event of a major natural disaster, the Deception Pass bridge will likely fail and the airport would be a crucial link to the mainland
- There are tourism benefits to local businesses, and also environmental benefits such as a reduction in automobile traffic with commuter flights
- There is an opportunity to create income from airport operations including airport hangar rentals and fuel sales
- There is an opportunity for public/private partnership(s) that can increase long-term sustainability and diversify management
- Private ownership of the airport has not led to sufficient management, and there is no certainty that promises made now by an interested party would actually materialize

The Port is currently assessing feasibility and we will update the community on any future actions and/or decisions through our website at: <https://portoc.org/port-projects/>