

# Plans completed for new runway

By **KIMBERLY DAVIS**

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Plans to build a 5,500-foot runway in Oberlin, and then lengthening it to 7,000 feet, are done and the state already has promised \$1 million for the plan.

Today, the city has a 3,450-foot runway north of town and west of U.S. 83. The city will lose 600 feet of that runway, said City Administrator Gary Shike, because the Decatur County Fairground is in the air space on the south side as defined by the Federal Aviation Administration.

Officials of Bus and Coach International, the firm which purchased the old Jennings school and remodeled it as its headquarters, asked for a longer runway, said Connie Grafel, marketing director for Oberlin-Decatur County Economic Development Corp. In May 2006, she said, the city and county signed an agreement to pursue a longer runway to help the business.

From there, an airport committee representing several groups started to work on the idea. Members of the Oberlin City Council, Decatur County commissioners, economic development representatives and other leaders have lobbied with state and federal officials and applied for grants to help pay for the project.

The committee has traveled to Hays and Topeka to talk with elected officials and the head of the Kansas Department of Transportation about the project.

At the beginning of the year, leg work for the project started to pay off when a letter from the state Transportation Department promised \$1 million for the estimated \$12 million project.

Although the \$1 million has been promised, the city doesn't actually have it yet, said Mr. Shike.

"While the request scored within the range of projects eligible to receive funding," the letter said, "we are aware that your project is not in a position to utilize the funds in the fiscal year 2009. Because your project scored within the 'eligible for funding' category, you will not be required to compete in future years. Your project will be at the top of the list ... however, we will not fund the project until you demonstrate that you will utilize the funding in the next fiscal year."

The city also will receive around \$90,000 for



**OUTSIDE THE AIRPORT** sits this sign showing people driving on U.S. 83 where the Oberlin City Airport is located. A committee is working on putting in a new, longer runway at the airport.

— Herald staff photo by Kimberly Davis

an automated weather observation system for the airport from the state.

The soonest the city could possibly have a 5,500 foot runway, said Mr. Shike, would be 2010, which is probably when the construction will actually start.

The longer runway, he said, won't actually be an addition to the current one, but will be new construction. It will intersect the old one.

This project, he said, will make the city more attractive to other businesses. Although Bus and Coach International spurred the idea, said Mayor Joe Stanley, the airport will continue to belong to the city.

Mr. Shike said he has appreciated the support and input for the project from the bus people, but there are lots of reasons to have a better airport.

The state and federal governments, said Mr. Shike, support better airports. The state, he said,

wants every Kansan to be in reach of air ambulance service all the time. The city doesn't have equipment for all-weather flights now, he said.

Ed Young, the director of the Kansas Department of Transportation aviation program, has been here several times and traveled with the group to Hays and Topeka. He has helped with the process a lot, said Mr. Shike.

Actually everyone has been helpful, including state legislators who have traveled or met the group other places, Congressman Jerry Moran and his staff and Sens. Sam Brownback and Pat Roberts and their staffs.

Continued support from the community is also appreciated, said Ms. Grafel. At the beginning of the project, people and groups in town wrote letters supporting the runway to state and federal officials.

At this point, there's no telling what amount of money the city might have to come up with.

The city, said Mr. Shike, is working with various government agencies, including the Transportation Department and Federal Aviation Administration, to see what is available. The state funds projects like this at 90 percent and the federal agency at 95 percent, he said, so some city money will be needed.

The city receives regular allotments from the federal agency, said Mr. Shike, and that money is being used to acquire land and easements for the runway.

The agency, said Ms. Grafel, is completing an air space review and then an environmental assessment will be done. Land acquisition is still in progress, she said.

Mr. Shike said the city has signed a contract with Prairie Land Electric Cooperative to bury power lines at the north end of the airport, near the township road, to clear the new runway.

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