

Neighbors rally against airport expansion

By Amanda Rittenhouse, Staff Writer

06/24/2008

Whitpain Township and some Whitpain residents living near Wings Field on Narcissa Road in Blue Bell disagree over a proposed move and enlargement of two Wings Field hangars.

Whitpain Township Solicitor Jim Garrity said Wings Field received preliminary opinion from the township zoning officer that Wings Field's proposal to demolish and rebuild two hangars larger and in a slightly different location was in compliance with township zoning laws. Garrity said Wings Field was also granted approval by the township for a paved area for parking aircraft called an itinerant apron. The approval for the itinerant apron is currently up for appeal in the Commonwealth Court. The Montgomery County Court affirmed the township's decision. "The zoning officer did issue his preliminary opinion that the hangars would be in compliance with zoning laws. Residents appealed the zoning officer's decision to the zoning board. The zoning board rendered its decision in support of the zoning officer's decision," Garrity said. Whitpain Zoning Officer Michael McAndrew said Wings Field is currently still on its second notice of preliminary opinion and if no one else appeals, then a 30-day period for appeal for residents will begin. Bob Mueller, a member of the Wings Field Preservation Associates board of directors, said Wings Field is one of the oldest continuously operating airports in the United States since 1930.

Mueller said the hangars to be replaced are 78 years old and were built to house smaller 1930s aircraft. Mueller said Wings Field is expanding the hangar buildings because modern airplanes are larger. The reason for the enlargement of the hangars is for housing customer's aircrafts indoors rather in outdoor tie down spaces, Mueller said.

Mueller said existing hangar three is 8,320 square feet. It is proposed to be enlarged to 10,800 square feet. Existing hangar four is currently 9,050 square feet. It is proposed to be enlarged to 13,400 square feet. No final development plans have been made, Mueller said.

"We are planning to tear down hangars three and four, to rotate them 90 degrees so they are parallel to Narcissa Road and form two rows of buildings to create a sound barrier," Mueller said.

Mueller said when Wings Field was built in the 1930s Whitpain Township had no zoning laws and when zoning laws were passed in 1950, the property was considered a non-conforming use. The township passed an ordinance law in 1984 that non-conforming use properties within the township cannot grow by more than 25 percent.

Members of Wings Concerned Residents are seeking an appeal to the zoning hearing board's decision. The main plaintiffs in the litigation are Wings Concerned Residents members Ronald Glazer, Bert Stein and Bradley Beckman. All three plaintiffs live in proximity of Wings Field, Stein said. Burt Stein lives on Huntsman Lane and said he and other members of Wings Concerned Residents are concerned about fumes, noise and increased air traffic. Stein said he thinks Wings Field has already expanded to its permitted 25 percent.

"We are opposed to expansion because it adversely affects the health, welfare and safety of our community," Stein said.

Doug Seiler of Walton Road is a neighbor to Wings Field and member of Wings Concerned Residents. Seiler also opposes expansion at Wings field. "I believe that the hangars being turned 90 degrees to Narcissa Road is a good thing and pulling them back from the road is a good thing. What I think is a problem is allowing the hangars to be built wider than they currently are," Seiler said.

Seiler said he is concerned larger hangars would allow for storage and takeoff of larger aircraft. He said noise has gone up dramatically since the Wings Field runway expanded in 2001.

"Wider hangers mean bigger planes. Bigger planes mean more noise to the residents," Seiler said.

Mueller said the runway was extended in 2001 from 2,600 feet to 3,700 feet long and said Wings Field still averages two small jets a day. Mueller said corporate and charter fleets are too big and require too much runway space to land at Wings Field.

"Wings Field is part of the national transportation system and under federal law an airport like Wings cannot discriminate against any aircraft. We cannot ban jets or helicopters," Mueller said. Mueller said if a 737 landed in Wings Field the runway would have to extend about a mile long. All airliners, fighter planes, medium and larger business class planes need much more than 3,700 feet to land, he said.