

Airport authority votes to self-fund project

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BULLHEAD CITY — For the Mohave County Airport Authority Board of Directors, it was a question of how a project would be funded, not if it would be.

And after hearing that the how likely would impact the when, the board voted unanimously to use its own funds to finance the terminal building “holdroom alteration project” at Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport.

The holdroom is a section of the terminal dedicated to holding passengers who are awaiting their flights. The holdroom — or concourse — has limited capacity. Occasionally, when multiple outgoing charter flights are scheduled at roughly the same times, the area is overflowing.

With attempts to maintain social distancing because of the COVID-19 pandemic, it makes operation difficult.

“Quite frankly, it's a safety issue with the capacity in the building,” said Airport Director Jeremy Keating, a safety issue that predates COVID. “We've always known ... we knew we needed to do something.”

Impetus for the project, however, was diminished when COVID-19 prompted the cancellation of many charter flights landing at and originating from Laughlin/Bullhead International Airport.

Swift Air, the carrier operating charter flights for Harrah's-Laughlin, has resumed flights to the Bullhead City airport, often having more than one inbound or outbound flight a day.

Airport officials are hoping that Don Laughlin's Riverside Resort Hotel Casino will resume its flights with Sun Country this fall or winter.

Keating, who estimated the cost of the project to be \$300,000 to \$400,000, said the question for the board Wednesday was “how are we going to pay for it.”

He said the board had two primary options: pay for it with the airport authority's own money or wait for approval of a grant from the Federal Aviation Administration that likely would fund the project through Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act money.

“It is fundable, but we do have to go through (an extensive FAA process),” Keating said.

He said the grant application process — and other requirements attached to the use of federal dollars — would make the project more expensive and likely would delay its start which, in turn, would delay its completion.

He said the airport authority could save both time and money by using its own funds.

“We have a little bit of money we can spend on this type of thing,” he said, noting the expansion wasn't included in the capital budget for the current fiscal year. “I want to get it done as soon as possible.”

Jackie Wallin, a member of the board of directors, asked if the project could wait.

Keating said that it could, although he added that he was concerned about FAA or grant changes during the interim and the potential for increased costs.

He said that either option would require the airport authority to use its own money to pay for the project; a grant simply would reimburse the authority.

“And it's not that we're not going to utilize these grants,” said Board President Ardie Lauxman. “They will be used down the road.”

Board members agreed that the project was important, both for the safety of passengers and airport staff and for the image of the facility as it attempts to

attract scheduled commercial service and return traffic on the casino-contracted charters.

“There is still a need for additional space going forward,” Keating said, hopeful that air traffic would rebound as COVID-19 becomes less of a factor in passengers' decision to fly.

“No question that it's needed,” Wallin agreed.

Keating said the expansion would add “70 to 80 extra seats in there” and could begin in two to three months if self-funded.

He estimated it wouldn't begin until next spring if the authority chose the grant process.

Keating said bids could be sought within a month if the project were self-funded; he predicted the grant process wouldn't be complete until January at the earliest or perhaps March at the latest, at which point the project could go out for bids.

Directors generally agreed that the faster timeline and the probability of a lower project cost were reason enough to support the self-funding option.