

MidAmerica critic would back new warehouse, if ...

Long-term deal would be needed, GOP County Board member says

BY MIKE FITZGERALD
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MASCOUTAH — A St. Clair County Board member who is a longtime critic of MidAmerica St. Louis Airport said he would support a second warehouse at the airport, but only if a long-term deal is inked to ensure regular air cargo flights from China take place.

County leaders are considering whether to build a second warehouse at MidAmerica after an MD-11 cargo plane from China landed in a test run last week.

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"We'd have to put a really sharp pencil on the paper to see what would happen as far as payback on something like that," said St. Clair County Board member Craig Hubbard, R-O'Fallon, a longtime critic of the airport's management. "I would support it if there was a way of showing we had a long-term contract."

Five years ago, the county spent \$8 million, with 90 percent coming from the federal government, to build a 50,000-square-foot warehouse to handle air cargo. Two years ago, it spent another \$3 million for refrigeration units and other specialized equipment to handle flowers flown up each week from South America.

But 10 days ago, the county's Public Building Commission signed a deal with The Boeing Co. that gave it exclusive control of the warehouse. Boeing announced its plans to open an assembly plant at the warehouse with an investment of \$10 million, creating up to 75 jobs, by early next year.

County Board Chairman Mark Kern began talking about the possibility of a second warehouse being built to support more air traffic from Asia in the wake of Sky Lease Cargo landing one of its MD-11 cargo planes at the

airport.

The county expects regular air cargo service from Asia to MidAmerica to begin in the fourth quarter of 2010, according to a news release issued by an airport spokeswoman.

Kern did not return calls seeking comment for this article.

But Kern told The Associated Press on Friday that plans for a new warehouse expansion at MidAmerica would rest on the airport's ability to seal the deal with China for a new trade route.

Kern said the airport already has proven its worth, crediting it with helping encourage an independent federal commission's decision in 2005 to keep the adjacent Scott Air Force Base open. MidAmerica and the air base share a runway.

Taxpayers pay for the 12-year-old airport, which today lacks any passenger airlines or air cargo carriers, and whose passenger terminal stands empty.

MidAmerica continues to lose more than \$5 million annually, a deficit that taxpayers cover with general revenue money.

Aviation expert Pete Zamoyski, of Miami, Fla., said he doubts regular air service with Asia — or anywhere else overseas — can begin until the county has use of another warehouse.

Without an available

warehouse, "that's kind of a problem if they don't have any place for (the U.S. Customs Bureau) to look at everything," Zamoyski said. "Because if there is no warehouse, then where are they going to deliver cargo that's going outbound?"

Until the end of July, the warehouse was being leased to a firm that was coordinating the importation of flowers from South America and their distribution to St. Louis and across the Midwest.

But the Public Building Commission three weeks ago notified the firm the deal was off and the warehouse would be going to a bigger tenant, which turned out to be Boeing.

The air trade route with Asia was supposed to be the second half of the equation involving the flowers from South America, i.e., Asian goods would be off-loaded onto the planes headed back to South America.

Now that the flights from South America have ended, it makes no sense to fly in cargo from Asia without an available warehouse, Zamoyski said.

"Somebody screwed up somewhere," he said.

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