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[Metro Airport expansion plan doesn't fly with neighbors](#)

By [Ed Brayton](#) 3/21/08 12:05 AM

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A planned expansion of Detroit Metropolitan Airport is threatening to uproot thousands of people and dozens of businesses, but local officials and residents are fighting back.

The Wayne County Airport Authority (WCAA) is in the beginning stages of a project that would add an additional runway to the airport, allowing the facility to serve more customers. The Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) most recent studies offer a range of three predictions and conclude that Metro Airport, already the 12th largest airport in North America, will continue to see customers served rising from 1.2 percent to 2.7 percent per year

through 2025.

But in order to add the additional runway to handle the projected business, it will have to uproot around 900 homes inhabited by some 3,600 people, as well as 30 to 40 businesses and an elementary school, mostly in neighboring Romulus.

Continued -

Romulus Mayor Alan Lambert is concerned about the effect this will have on his city and he told Michigan Messenger that he thinks the expansion is unnecessary: "Romulus is not opposed to expansion of the airport. Our problem is that we're not getting any answers to our questions. We don't see any need for the expansion. They're basing the need on a projected 20 percent increase in the next couple decades, but the last two years has been flat."

Scott Roberts, deputy director of public affairs for the WCAA, says that his organization has been in constant communication with local officials and will happily answer any questions they have.

Lambert is particularly concerned about the dislocation of so many homes and businesses, and about the effect this will have on his tax base. While the city will see an increase in revenue from the parking tax and other levies at the airport, the loss of the property taxes from 900 homes and the revenues generated by the businesses that will be forced to shut down and move, perhaps outside the city, could have a significant effect on the city's financial health during already very difficult economic times in Michigan.

Others are more concerned about how fairly the homeowners and business owners will be treated when it comes time for the WCAA to buy up the property. By law, the government can seize private property for such a public use by invoking eminent domain, but it must also fairly compensate the property owners.

State law requires that the government pay 125 percent of the current appraised value for each and every property. That's the theory. In the real world, however, the governmental body, in this case the airport authority, has every incentive to keep the cost of the project down by negotiating as low a price as possible for the properties it needs to procure. And there are many things it can do to depress the values of the property in order to do so.

Lambert points out that the actual building of this project may not begin for another 10 or 12 years, which Roberts confirmed to Michigan Messenger. This, Lambert says, in effect "holds the property hostage" because everyone knows the project is going on and, as a result, no one is going to buy property in that area. With no sales in that area for a decade, on top of the already depressed property values of the last couple years, the value of those properties will plummet even further.

To make things worse, the WCAA can further depress those values by "spot buying" — buying up just a few properties here and there in the neighborhood years in advance of the need to buy up the whole area. Alan Ackerman, a Michigan attorney nationally renowned for his work on eminent domain cases, including the two most significant cases in Michigan history, told Michigan Messenger: "If the airport starts spot buying early, that will make the remainder of the neighborhood a wasteland as those homes fall into disrepair, get boarded up and are allowed to crumble."

Ultimately, Ackerman said, the homeowners will likely make out OK if they're patient, but they will likely have to go to court and fight for a more reasonable payoff after the government's initial lowball offer. He also pointed out that the FAA has its own guidelines for invoking eminent domain that are more generous than the law requires. For instance, the FAA offers up to \$25,000 in relocation assistance to homeowners if they can't find a home at a comparable cost. But the businesses that are dislocated, Ackerman said, will face a much tougher road:

Everything is an uphill fight for the businesses. They will use vacant plants as comparables on an appraisal, not necessarily in suitable condition. They will be rough in payment for relocation benefits. They will not pay for the best use of the plant, especially those that are environmentally

sensitive. They have to fight back, but it'll be a hell of a fight. The battle for the businesses will be longer and more severe than the battle for residential homeowners. I handled the case for St. Lawrence Press in an earlier airport expansion. They offered \$1.6 million, we ended up with \$7.6 million, but it took seven years of court battles and they finally settled the week before the trial started.

Lambert says that he and the mayors of other surrounding cities — Dearborn, Dearborn Heights, Taylor and Inkster — have joined together and will be speaking to the WCAA. They want the project tabled until they get all their questions answered.

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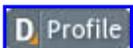
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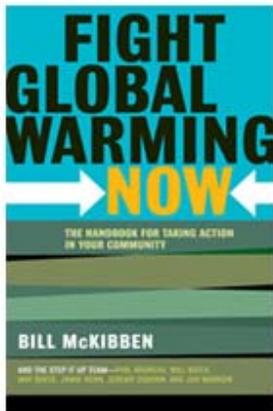
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