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Marion council approves airport purchase

Public ownership will open access to state funds



Rick Smith,
 The Gazette
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 PM

MARION
 — So
 Marion city
 officials
 bought an
 airport
 Thursday
 night.

The City
 Council
 voted 5-0
 to direct
 City
 Manager
 Lon
 Pluckhahn
 to close on the purchase of the privately owned Marion Airport for
 \$1.67 million.



(File Photo) Then owners of the Marion Airport, the late Perry Walton, right, and Jan Walton, left, are pictured by a helicopter at the airport on Thursday, October 15, 2009. (Crystal LoGiudice/The Gazette).



Back in January, the city had announced its intent to buy the airport, and the City Council subsequently approved a purchase agreement between the city and current owner, Jan Walton.

“Marion is purchasing the airport because it has significant potential to become a premier provider for general aviation services,” Pluckhahn said on Thursday.

No one on the council took tonight’s vote as a chance to comment on the airport’s purchase.

In short, ownership by the city allows the city to seek state aviation grants not available to a privately owned airport.

In fact, Marion already has submitted a grant application to the Iowa Department of Transportation, seeking \$922,677 in state funds to help the city create an airport layout plan and comprehensive plan, rehabilitate the runway and widen it by 50 feet and upgrade the airport’s fuel facility.

Last night, the council also directed Pluckhahn to execute an agreement with LuxAir Aviation LLC to manage, maintain and insure the airport facilities for 10 years at no cost to the city. The agreement calls for an option for a five-year contract extension.

LuxAir Aviation is a new corporation created by Genesis Equities LLC, which is a Marion entity owned by Jeff Witter, daughter Hannah Kustes and the Witter family, Pluckhahn said. He said Genesis is working with the city on the project to relocate Marion Iron Works in the city.

Kustes on Thursday said the changes that are coming at the Marion Airport will help bring about improvements that are “long overdue” and ones that will “raise the bar” at an airport that already is “heavily used.”

Kustes also said an improved Marion Airport will complement The Eastern Iowa Airport and will give the Cedar Rapids-Marion metro area two quality airports to serve the region.

Much at the Marion Airport, she said, will stay the same during a transition period of a year or more as improvements are made. Airport events, tours, flight training and maintenance will continue



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with the same “great staff,” she said.

Nick Glew, president of the Marion Economic Development Co., on Thursday called the city’s purchase of the airport a “great thing for the community.”

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Industrial parks in Marion next to the airport should provide a “significant amount of demand” for an improved airport, Glew said.

Pluckhahn said the \$1.67 million purchase price includes matching funds required of the city if it secures the state grant funds.

The city manager called Marion’s airport purchase a “new model”

that allows the city to own the property while depending on the private sector to drive economic development around the property. The airport will become an “economic development tool to keep Marion competitive,” he said.

Pluckhahn said the Marion Airport is in the top 10 in its class in Iowa and has the potential to move up the list in terms of airport activity. The airport will serve private and company-owned aircraft with no plans to handle commercial air traffic, he said.

Longer-range plans, he said, include acquiring additional property to enable the city to add an east-west runway that is longer than the existing north-south runway.

The Marion airport has been around since the 1950s. Jan Walton and her husband Perry, who died in 2012, began operating it in 1986, and they purchased it in 1994. Jan Walton will continue to operate a flight school, Pluckhahn said.

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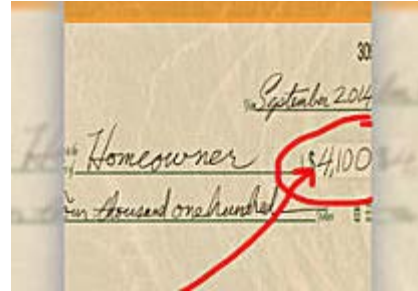
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