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Waterloo airport fights to save traffic control tower operations

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\$3 FOR FIRST 13 WEEKS



Waterloo Regional Airport air traffic control tower as shown Thursday.

BRANDON POLLOCK, COURIER STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

WATERLOO — The Waterloo Regional Airport is fighting to keep a key element of its air traffic control tower.

The Federal Aviation Administration has recommended removing Terminal Radar Approach Control, or TRACON, operations from the Waterloo tower and having those duties handled remotely by staff at the Des Moines International Airport.

The plan still would leave some air traffic controllers in the Waterloo tower to handle operations on the airfield itself.

But members of the Waterloo Regional Airport Board are voicing concerns about the change, which some believe would be the first step to closing or privatizing the remaining operations in the Waterloo tower.

“I think this is really important to this airport,” said board chairman Hugh Field. “The bottom line on this is that if we lose the radar we’re going to ultimately lose the tower.”

Field was encouraging Grow Cedar Valley, formerly the Cedar Valley Alliance and Chamber, and others to reach out to Iowa’s congressional delegation to lobby against the measure.

“We need to make sure the people who weigh in on this at the congressional level understand how important Waterloo thinks it is,” he said.

TRACON is the part of the air traffic control system that tracks an aircraft shortly after takeoff and just before landing.

Section 804 of the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 required the FAA to look at realigning and consolidating air traffic control facilities when it could reduce costs without adversely affecting safety.

The FAA has already consolidated TRACON operations at other airports and now has the Waterloo Regional Airport and several others in its sights.

An FAA report recommending shifting Waterloo TRACON operations to Des Moines projected the move would save \$1.6 million over a 17-year period. Waterloo would retain its radar equipment, but the coverage would be handled remotely by controllers in Des Moines.

“The realignment is expected to result in operational efficiencies and other benefits,” the report states. “Realignment may increase the efficiencies of arrivals to (Des Moines) from the northeast and allow for smoother coordination due to the combined airspace.”

Based on the realignment, the 16 staff members at the Waterloo tower would shrink to nine people while the Des Moines staffing would grow from 26 to 30 workers.

Waterloo airport officials, however, question the projected cost savings.

Nick Bird, FAA air traffic manager in Waterloo, confirmed the report does not factor in nearly \$10 million in next generation radar equipment recently installed at the Waterloo airport.

Waterloo officials were relieved when the FAA brought the Standard Terminal Automation Replacement System, or STARS, to Waterloo in the fall of 2017 because they believed it signaled a desire to keep the TRACON there.

“We thought it was a big deal when they installed the STARS,” Field said. “We thought it locked them in on this tower.”

While Field suggested the loss of TRACON operations could lead to the Waterloo tower closing, others said it was more likely the remaining tower operations would be privatized by the FAA.

Several pilots at Tuesday’s Waterloo Regional Airport Board meeting, where Bird presented the FAA proposal, said they’ve had experience with privatized air traffic control towers and believed Waterloo’s current arrangement provided better service.

The FAA is accepting comments on the proposal through May 3. Following a 60-day comment review period, the final report along with public comments will be submitted to Congress.

More information and a comment portal can be found at www.regulations.gov/document?D=FAA-2019-0153-0001.



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