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Airport grants good news for Ottumwa

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The announcement earlier this week that Ottumwa will receive nearly \$3.5 million for the airport runway reconstruction and extension is good news. We're glad to see it.

While airports may not have become the hubs of daily life futurists predicted some six or seven decades ago, they remain key civic and economic infrastructure. Anyone who has watched developments at the airport over the past decade can see how it has acted as a magnet for new opportunities.

Has the airport met the most optimistic forecasts? Of course not. That's not the same as saying it has failed in its purpose as a magnet for developers. Magnets have different strengths, after all.

To stick with the metaphor for a moment, the work at the airport will strengthen Ottumwa's aerial magnet. A larger runway does open up additional possibilities and makes the magnet's pull a bit stronger. That's desirable.

When Ottumwa's main runway hits 6,000 feet in length, it will be in the top 10 for Iowa airports. That's capable of handling just about any air traffic that might reasonably be expected in Ottumwa now, or within the next decades.

Realistically, Ottumwa probably has a three to five year window before things get a bit more complicated. The nearest competitor, a proposed airport between Oskaloosa and Pella, is a mess and seems headed for a long court fight.

Right now the pitch to prospective residents at the airport or new businesses is simple. "Come here," Ottumwa can say. "The Pella-Oskaloosa project is bogged down in bickering. It's going to be tied up in court. We're open for business."

If Ottumwa waits until another competitor enters the fray, things get more difficult. We're better off acting now.

We understand the questions some will have. As soon as word of any grant gets out, some immediately begin complaining that the money is better spent on roads. We're certainly not going to argue Ottumwa's roads are smooth as glass, nor will we say the city is anywhere near getting them into the kind of shape they really should be in.

But what the critics often miss is that grants are not money given without strings. Most simply cannot be used for anything other than what was specified in the grant application. Saying grant money given for the airport or the downtown streetscape plan should be diverted is a fundamental misunderstanding of how grants work.

The award from the FAA won't cover the cost of the expansion. More money will be needed, and at least some of it will have to come from taxpayers. It's an investment, something that the community must hope pays off over time. And, like most investments, there isn't a guarantee of the payoff.

Not acting may save money now. It will most likely cost money in the long run, though, through missed opportunities. Failing to act now, while Ottumwa's window is open, guarantees only failure.

There's a lot of work to do. Moving ahead with the airport's improvements is an act of faith in both Ottumwa today and Ottumwa tomorrow. It is a statement of intent that speaks to both the desire to expand its business base and better serve those who may come in the future.

The grant is good news, not a guarantee. And that's good enough for now.

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