



ASPEN AIRPORT LOOKS TO THE FUTURE

News / Airports / Routes



Officials in Colorado took a major step towards determining the **future** of **Aspen-Pitkin County Airport** (ASE) at a recent county board of commissioners meeting when they voted to approve one of 18 layout plans (ALP) for the development of the airport. With only a 320-foot separation from the runway centerline to the taxiway centerline, the airport, a gateway to Aspen's posh ski resorts and palatial homes, has been operating for the past decade under an FAA-granted modification to standard from full Group III airport design, which requires a 400-foot minimum separation.

As a result, rather than permitting aircraft with wingspans up to 118 feet to operate at ASE as per Group III standard, the maximum span allowed there was capped at 95 feet. While this limit encompasses long-range business jets such as the Bombardier Global 5000/6000 and Gulfstream G550 with their 94 foot wingspans, it notably excludes Gulfstream's flagship, the G650, which exceeds the modified standard by nearly three feet, and the future Global 7000 and 8000, which will have 104-foot spans.

An Eye to the Future

While that is certainly of concern to the area's well-heeled residents and visitors, the plan the County has set in motion is concerned mainly with ASE's future viability, as it seeks to avoid any disruption to scheduled commercial service, according to airport director John Kinney. "The workhorse aircraft here, the Q400 and specifically the CRJ700 series aircraft are going to be

retiring, the majority by 2025,” he told **AIN**. “The majority of aircraft that are coming on board in the category of regional jet, have a wingspan greater than 95 feet.” According to Kinney, the FAA has stressed that they would prefer for any AIP grant-assisted development plans at the airport to be aimed at achieving full Class III status, to allow these new aircraft to operate safely there.

8A, the final proposal on the table, as approved by the Pitkin County Board of Commissioners, includes relocating the airport’s 8,000-foot single runway 80 feet to the west, widening it from 100 to 150 feet, and increasing its weight-bearing capacity from 100,000 pounds to 150,000 pounds, an approximately \$90 million project (adjusted for future pricing) along with the construction of a new 80,000-sq-ft commercial terminal that will replace the 40-year-old, 17,500-sq-ft existing structure.

The plan approval now triggers the start of an 18 to 20-month environmental assessment (EA), culminating hopefully in the minds of airport officials with a finding of no significant impact. A large part of the EA will involve feedback from the local community, among them business jet owners and operators. “We’re talking with people who have primary or secondary residences in this community, and they can’t bring the jet into their backyard,” Kinney said. Among the issues the EA will address will be the suitability of larger aircraft such as the Boeing 737, which has a wingspan up to 117 feet five inches with winglets, and the similarly-sized Airbus A320 operating at ASE following the runway improvement. “Can it physically fit in the box? Yes, but can it operate at these altitudes?” questioned Kinney, referring to the airport’s challenging terrain and the performance requirements for a single-engine missed approach scenario.

Kinney is confident that funding for the project will be available as the successful conclusion of the EA process. “I’ve never seen the FAA leave an airport standing at the altar when it comes to the character of the airport being changed, or scheduled service being interrupted because grant funds were not delivered in a timely way,” he said. “Even if we decided to push the button today, and say we are going to develop and modernize the runway and the FAA pushed a bucket of money right towards us, what we are doing today [launching the EA phase of the project] is exactly what we would be doing if they presented the money to us tomorrow.” If all goes according to plan, the project is slated to break ground in 2018, for completion in the 2025 timeframe.

The selection of Plan 8A, and its stated priorities of runway improvement and the construction of a new terminal, also puts an at least 10-year hold on the proposed development of the west side of the airport, including the establishment of a second FBO, a discussion which has churned for the past several years, as it would involve the rerouting of a local road.

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