

CAPE BLANCO AIRPORT AREA ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT FEASIBILITY STUDY



Figure 1 -- Cape Blanco Airport with Humbug Mountain in the Background¹

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Prepared By:
John Irwin

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Executive Summary

North Curry County has in its territory an amazing artifact of the Second World War, a mile-long industrial strength airport. This example of the civil engineering and technical prowess of the United States at a time of national challenge is a monument to those who served and met the challenges of that time. Today one would be hard-pressed to gain approval for locating such an airport in north Curry County. Yet there it is and there it will remain.

In this feasibility study we have asked the question: how might this facility and the adjacent county-owned property add value into today's regional economy?

Six alternatives are considered in this study:

- Alternative 1: Hold Property for Future Use
- Alternative 2: Natural Resources Extraction on County Parcel
- Alternative 3: Sell County Property 311S15-4200
- Alternative 4: Land Swap of County Property 311S15-4200
- Alternative 5: Develop an Airport Industrial, Business or Technology Park
- Alternative 6: Cape Blanco Airport as an Ecotourism and Art Tourism Portal

An additional opportunity could be derived from the airport's emergency status as the airport serves a critical emergency need. It is the only runway of this length and capacity substantially above sea-level on the Oregon Coast. The Coast Guard facility at Astoria is at 25 feet sea level and would have a high probability of severe damage from a tsunami. Other airports along the coast are above sea-level but are also at risk of tsunami damage, too short and of a substantially lesser load capacity than the Cape Blanco Airport. This airport at 5,100 feet x 150 feet and at 250 feet above sea-level is ideally suited as an emergency facility and is so classified by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Oregon Department of Aviation (ODA). As such at a minimum the landing strip lighting and the location beacon need to be brought back into repair. This is a safety issue. Emergency management planners would be well-advised to hold periodic drills and training exercises at this facility to prepare for the inevitable coastal tsunami. These drills would bring revenue into the county.

Today many challenges exist to the development of a Cape Blanco Airport Industrial, Business or Technology Park. This study explored successful industrial parks to see what particulars could be emulated in north Curry County in conjunction with the state-owned Cape Blanco Airport.

Three main factors of successful airport industrial, business or technology parks are:

- good transportation alternatives which allow manufacturers to receive raw materials as necessary and to get their products to markets economically;
- access to a population with sufficient employable workers; and
- a substantial and generous amount of shovel-ready land to dedicate to this endeavor.

At this time none of these factors are able to be duplicated satisfactorily for the sites in question in this study.

Here are some of the challenges to be addressed:

Airport

- Non-National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (non-NPIAS) status means the airport is not eligible for FAA funding. This imposes a substantial barrier to obtaining funds for necessary improvements to enhance the commercial viability of the airport.
- ODA deems 8,000 feet as necessary for support of commercial shuttle aircraft. Airport runway expansion would have to extend into either Oregon State Park lands or into an adjacent farming operation. Neither is in the planning horizons of the ODA.
- No plans to add fueling station.
- Air quality and noise also are raised as issues.

County Land

- A road would need to be developed to provide access to the county property.
- Cost of preparation to a “shovel-ready” status (e.g., leveling, drainage).
- Lack of power to the county-owned parcel.
- Strong potential for protected species.
- Measure 49 implications plus transfer to a private party requires the PF zoning to revert to the zoning of the majority of other properties in the area (i.e., agricultural or forest/grazing).

Airport and County Land

- The number of available acres is well below normal acreage for such parks.
- The amount of usable land is restricted by the geography and other factors.
- Surface transportation and parking are an issue.
- Sewage disposal at the airport or on the county-owned land.
- Water at the airport or on the county-owned land.
- Poor major highway access (I-5).
- Lack of rail access.
- Lack of access to a large population (workforce).

The sum total of all of these challenges would still not prevent such a development. However, there are significant market and political forces that suggest this is not the time to pursue such development. The sum of these factors suggests that the return on county investment dollars would face a high risk of being satisfactory. As is the nature of markets a number of factors may shift over the next 5 to 10 years that may make development of this airport and an associated industrial, business or technology park viable. As such it makes sense to re-visit this opportunity on a periodic basis.

This is not to say that today other land sites in north Curry County owned by the county or available through a land swap might not have some level of viability as an industrial, business or technology park. These alternate sites would also face challenges for development and sustainability. However, even though their location might eliminate some of the challenges faced at the airport properties, there are still a number of market factors to be understood and met. One of the substantial issues for such developments remains with the area workforce, one that can meet the evolved growing needs of knowledge-based employers that might locate in the region.

There is a significant, perhaps huge, economic development opportunity in the north county. High-quality, well-planned visitor experiences targeting the upscale tourist market could provide substantial dollars to the local economy. The airport does provide value to the county today. It also can serve as a tourism portal when systematically integrated into a high-quality visitor experience. This requires a re-thinking of how tourism is approached in the region.

The region's natural beauty and associated assets has a potential return well beyond that of development of an industrial, business or technology park. This potential is worthy of further in depth exploration as the new millennium unfolds. We are becoming increasingly aware of the finite, interconnected and precious nature of our planet home. Likewise, tourism is becoming an increasingly popular expression of this awareness. With advances in transportation and information technology, ever more remote areas of the earth are coming within reach of the traveler. In fact, ***tourism is now the world's largest industry, with nature tourism the fastest growing segment!***

Residents of north Curry County will benefit from a full exploration and implementation of economic development approaches available to them to realize the tremendous potential benefits that can accrue to the region and its residents. These opportunities can provide benefits that meet the highest levels of scrutiny by environmentalists and by those who seek to sustain and grow business in the region. The eco-tourism and art-tourism approach can rise to this level of scrutiny, protect the environment, retain much of the character of the region and provide living wage jobs.

What began as a study to understand how Cape Blanco Airport and the adjacent county-owned property might add value into today's regional economy ended up again revealing and reinforcing the opportunity to beneficially exploit the region's natural resources.

View the entire study at:

<http://www.callineb.com/documents.htm> or
<http://curryecondev.org/StudiesProjectsSurveys.htm>

ⁱ Photo by Wingspar, http://www.pbase.com/wingspar/aerial_shots, retrieved March 27, 2007