

Hangar-office in holding pattern

Environmental study regulation delaying project

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OXFORD — Town officials and lawmakers are still awaiting on the start of a new hangar project at Waterbury-Oxford Airport that would bring in 300 new jobs.

The \$33 million hangar and office project — that Oxford approved more than two years ago — has been tied up at the state level over an environmental study performed by a private consultant and paid for by the project's developer.

Last year, BL Companies in Meriden completed a draft environmental study, which was funded by Keystone Aviation Services. A hearing was set in December 2009 on the study, but was later postponed. The draft was never made public. The project has been stalled since then.

Legislation now has been proposed to fix how these studies are implemented and funded, and to push this project along.

The proposed law, Senate Bill 412, would clarify existing regulations by making it clear that for any development requiring a study, the developer will pay the state agency involved, and the agency then would hire a consultant to complete the report. It would allow any previous studies, such as BL's, to be reviewed.

This project is important not only to Oxford but the state, said Herman Schuler, the town's economic development director. It would create 300 construction jobs, plus 300 permanent jobs, he said.

"This is a win for the town, it's a win for the airport, and it's a win for the state," Schuler said.

Keystone, a longtime leaseholder at the state-owned airport, is set to build a

273,000-square-foot hangar and office facility.

Schuler said Oxford has a stake in the project because it sold a lot in the town's industrial park to Claris Corporation of Newtown, which is building the hangar. The company has been approved to remove 282,000 cubic yards of earth from the lot to create an 85,000-square-foot building, which would attract new business to town, he said. Most of the earth removed will be used on site for the hangar.

The airport, which is owned by the state Department of Transportation, houses more than 250 aircraft. It has a daily average of 175 takeoffs and landings, and that is expected to increase to 190 in 2012.

Last week, Schuler, lawmakers and environmental representatives spoke in favor of the proposed legislation before the Transportation Committee. Sen. Robert J. Kane, R-Watertown, and State Rep. David K. Labriola, R-Naugatuck, asked the committee to support it.

"This will make possible such a wonderful project, which will create jobs and provide a boost not only to the local Oxford economy but to the region at large," said Labriola.

Without the changes, the DOT would have to perform another environmental impact study that would cost \$100,000 to state taxpayers, and delay the project another year, he said.

Karl J. Wagener, executive director of the Council on Environmental Quality, also testified in favor of the changes. In his letter dated March 10, Wagener said the proposed bill would provide clarification for the DOT's authority to delegate the task of preparing an environmental study.

The study by BL was completed after lawmakers didn't approve legislation to skip or speed up the study in 2009.

It evaluates 18 areas of potential impact the project would have on the environment, such as traffic, socioeconomics and hazardous sites. It found little to no impact in most categories, but lists unavoidable adverse impacts, including loss of wetlands. The DOT declined to comment, said Kevin Nursick, a DOT spokesman.