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Airport district closer to approval

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Neighbors fighting changes around the Rock Hill/York County Airport seized one of their final protest opportunities this week, imploring a city planning board to halt land rules they fear will drive down their home values.

But after nearly three hours of haggling, the proposal for an airport overlay district, or AOD, continued its march toward approval. Planning commissioners voted Tuesday night to recommend it to the City Council.

"Hopefully, this exercise, one more time, will teach us that the more involvement we get on the front end, the less hassle we'll get on the back end," said planning commissioner Harold Peoples. "I hope it's taken to heart."

Peoples listened to neighbors make a series of familiar arguments, many of them in the form of emotional pleas. "We all want to stay there," said homeowner Dean Archer. "We all want to live happy. But it's too late. You need to stop this AOD now."

At least one surprise player joined the debate, but not on the side of the opposition. York County Councilman Curwood Chappell showed up to counter that Rock Hill needs a viable airport to prosper.

"I've flown all around this state in the last 60 years," said Chappell, a pilot since World War II. "When I land on a dirt strip, there's no jobs, slow growth, a high rate of unemployment. My experience is that if a creek doesn't run, it stagnates. So it is with the city of Rock Hill."

This marked one of the few occasions that Chappell found himself in agreement with York County Regional Chamber of Commerce officials and local developers such as Skip Tuttle, each of whom shared similar sentiments. Chamber board members formally endorsed the proposal this week.

The new rules aim to protect land around the airport, where local officials are pursuing a 1,000-foot runway extension in hopes of luring more corporate jet traffic. Neighbors view the rules as a major step toward a bigger airport -- and the disruptions that would come with it.

Federal dollars are more readily available to airports where land restrictions have been imposed.

Opponents stayed mostly peaceful, though an outburst from one woman prompted commission Chairman Tom Roper to ask, "Will you be quiet, please?"

Some neighbors believe the outcry over the past six months has hurt their own interests by bringing increased attention to the presence of the airport.

"It's widely known now," Kestrel Drive resident Eleanor Van Dyke said at Tuesday's meeting. "I don't think anybody could move into our area without knowing they are going to have all of this noise. I think we'll have a difficult time selling."

Neighbors are expected to speak again in protest on Sept. 8 when the Rock Hill City Council takes the first of two votes. The city and county have signaled intentions to move ahead, given that all sides have been able to weigh in.

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