

SUBJECT: Opening a state general aviation airport in Central Texas

COMMITTEE: Transportation — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Alexander, Hawley, Y. Davis, Hamric, Hill, Pickett, Swinford
0 nays
2 absent — Edwards, Noriega

WITNESSES: For — James M. Knox, Air Lifeline and Angelflight; Ken Kooock, Texas Aviation Association; Norm Scroggins, Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association; Mike Shahan, Texas Airport Management Association; Paul H. Smith, National Business Aviation Association; *Registered but did not testify:* William Bennett; Earl P. Deathe III; Jerry Hooper, Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association; Barbara MacLeod; Christina Rogers; Andy Taylor; Conrad Werkenthin, Texas Aviation Association; Jennifer D. Whitley

Against — Alfred D. Dotson and Jim Walker, Robert Mueller Airport Neighborhood Coalition; Kathleen Ensey; Joe Gieselman; Mary Lehmann; Karen Paup, Austin Community Development Commission; Suzanne Quinn, Austin Film Society and Austin Studios; *Registered but did not testify:* Janet Gilles; Matthew Harris; Rick Krivoniak, Windsor Park Neighborhood Association; Jeff Jack, Zilker Neighborhood Association; Regina Rogoff; Sonia Santana, Austin Community Development Commission; Stefan Schuster; Barrett Sundberg; Georgia N.R. Thomas

On — Charles Griffith, City of Austin; *Registered but did not testify:* David S. Fulton; William F. Looke, Texas Aerospace Commission; William J. Martin

BACKGROUND: Robert Mueller Municipal Airport in Austin ceased operations in June 1999 when Austin-Bergstrom International Airport opened at the former U.S. Air Force base. Also in 1999, the Austin Executive Air Park northeast of Austin closed, leaving a shortage of facilities for general aviation. The State Aircraft Pooling Board (SAPB), which flies and maintains an aircraft fleet for state agencies, moved to Austin-Bergstrom in 1999 after the 75th Legislature in 1997 authorized issuing about \$7 million in bond proceeds and \$5 million in property sale proceeds for the relocation.

General aviation refers to aircraft that is not operated as part of regularly scheduled commercial fleets, including military and other government-owned and -operated aircraft.

DIGEST:

HB 2522 would require the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), in conjunction with the SAPB, to open a general aviation airport in Austin. The location would have to be determined by the convenience, comfort, and accommodation of air traffic flying into Central Texas, including people traveling for business and commerce reasons, government officials, and tourists. The airport location also would have to be cost-efficient and conducive to the safe operation of aircraft. TxDOT could acquire property for this purpose by eminent domain.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2001.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

Austin is the only city of its size in the nation without a relief airport near downtown. The state should take the initiative to build a facility for use by general aviation pilots and ground operations. Besides being inconveniently located in relation to downtown, Austin-Bergstrom International Airport lacks adequate hangar space and other facilities for general aviation pilots and plane owners.

Lack of an additional airport causes delays for private pilots flying into Austin to conduct business or meet with legislators and representatives of state agencies and commissions. It may take longer to drive from available general aviation airports than it took to fly into Austin from distant Texas cities. This hampers economic development and citizens' ability to interact with state government.

Many general aviation pilots volunteer to provide humanitarian missions such as flying a cancer patient to another city for treatment or delivering organs needed for transplant. Time is crucial for such operations, and the lack of a nearby Austin airport could harm these vital missions.

HB 2522 would not require reopening Robert Mueller Airport. It would require only that TxDOT locate a suitable site in Austin. The bill would

provide the legal authority to make future appropriations to open a new airport. Federal funding also would be available for this project.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

HB 2522 would reopen the divisive debate over Robert Mueller Airport and its impact on the surrounding neighborhoods. There may be a need for a new airport, but not at the old Robert Mueller Airport location. Reopening the airport there would pose a safety risk for traffic into Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and could disrupt ongoing economic development programs, including a film studio, at the old airport.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

According to the bill's fiscal note, opening a new airport could cost more than \$27 million, including \$20 million in land acquisition costs and about \$6.5 million for construction or rehabilitation. The state should not commit itself to such an expensive project during a tight budget period.

NOTES:

The companion bill, SB 1617 by Armbrister, has been referred to the Senate State Affairs Committee.

SB 304 by Lucio, the SAPB sunset bill approved by the House on April 26, includes an amendment offered by Rep. Wilson that would instruct the SAPB to establish and maintain an airport in Central Texas. That amendment differs from HB 2522 in that it would require approval of the Austin City Council or Travis County Commissioners Court for proposed locations in Austin or elsewhere in Travis County. The House and the Senate have appointed conference committee members to consider SB 304. Rep. Wilson plans to offer an amendment to HB 2522 that a new airport would not be located at the old Robert Mueller Airport location.