

What Were They Thinking?

August 2024: Matt Benjamin

At the city council study session on July 25, council unanimously agreed to delay making any decisions respecting the Boulder Airport. This is what council member Matt Benjamin had to say about council's decision:

City Council Update: Airport Future Delayed

At the July 25th city council meeting, the council unanimously decided to delay the vote on the future direction of the airport. After more than a year of build-up, why pause now?

The decision to delay the vote on the airport's future was not taken lightly. It is a crucial step that requires careful consideration and understanding of the implications. A decision to close the airport carries with it a finality that cannot be overstated. Once a decision is made to close the airport, our city will never have an airport again. Unlike a recreation center, park, or any other piece of city infrastructure that can be rebuilt or moved, the Boulder airport can only exist in its current location. Therefore, the community, city staff, and council need to understand all options and consequences before making such a final decision.

With that said, I fully support operating and maintaining Boulder Municipal Airport in a manner that aligns with our community's values. Just as closing the airport would have long-reaching impacts, so would choosing to keep it. Supporting the hundreds of employees, businesses, research, and the aviation community at the airport requires understanding how to invest in an airport that meets both current and future needs. The airport in its current state does not reflect the quality of city infrastructure we expect. It has been somewhat neglected, with barely any operational and capital improvement plans from the 2007 Airport Master Plan met. Previous city councils and staff would need to explain why. The City's airport manager, John Kinney, explained the situation well: "It's like driving a car for 80,000 miles and now trying to give it an oil change." The window for preventive maintenance has long since passed.

There is a significant difference between the financial analysis of closing the airport and that of maintaining it. The costs to maintain, improve, and support the airport are well understood, and we have confidence in those numbers. This is in stark contrast to the plethora of unknowns and immense financial risks associated with closing the airport.

Pragmatic Decision Making

The decision between closing and maintaining the airport hinges on two key areas of analysis. First, a robust financial analysis is needed to understand the costs and risks associated with closing the airport. Second, a clear understanding of the legal questions surrounding the contracts and grants we've undertaken with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) is crucial. However, we currently lack a decent understanding of either. Our financial analysis still misses foundational information on the impacts of closing the airport. More study is required to understand the high costs of environmental remediation, site preparation, infrastructure costs, repayment to the FAA, and many others.

Our Council also recognizes that through the petition process, community members have placed two measures on the ballot this November. One directs the city to close Boulder Municipal Airport, and the other (contingent on the first passing) requires the land to be used for housing, with 50% designated as affordable housing. Given the financial unknowns and the impending voter decision, it was prudent for city council to delay any decisions on the future of the airport. In fact, the council does not have to make any decision on the airport. The airport is administered by the City Manager, and the council has no requirement to decide now or at any time what the ultimate fate of the airport is.

Given the lack of robust analysis to provide our community with a full picture of the feasibility of closing the airport, it would be prudent to vote NO on the two ballot measures that aim to close the airport. If, after more than a year of study, the city does not have a clear understanding of the financial cost to the city's budget and taxpayers, how can voters have confidence in two ballot measures based on nothing more than numbers doodled on the back of a napkin? There is no financial analysis from the supporters of these ballot measures, other than the intoxicating promise of "free land" and "affordable housing." Boulder voters have long been known for our deliberative process on land use, and we shouldn't take such a big risk without knowing if it's even worth it.

Avoid Letting History Repeat Itself

Small municipal airports offer a fascinating parallel to passenger rail service nearly 100 years ago. With the growth of national highways and airplanes in the early 20th century, there was less demand for passenger rail service. Over the past century, we've seen a steady decline in passenger rail service to mid-size and small cities. Only in the past twenty to thirty years have we seen a resurgence of passenger rail needs across the country. The biggest obstacle is the lack of infrastructure (rail lines) to support passenger rail. Thousands of miles of train tracks have been removed over the past century. For reference, Colorado had 5,519 miles of railway in 1920. By 2020, that number had shrunk to less than half, with 2,636 miles remaining. As the Front Range and Boulder know well, the need for passenger rail has never been stronger, yet it seems increasingly expensive and distant.

Municipal airports, like our own, could face a similar fate. Pressure to close them now could leave us vulnerable to meet the needs of tomorrow. As our roads become more congested and polluted, and our passenger rail service remains frustratingly out of reach, our municipal airports could provide the infrastructure hub for quiet, zero-emission, fast, and frequent transportation. These transportation options are not science fiction; they exist now and are gaining traction. The lesson history teaches us is that once we eliminate fundamental infrastructure that moves people and goods, it becomes exponentially difficult and expensive to bring it back.