

Montana Aeronautics Board
Montana Department of Transportation; Aeronautics
2630 Airport Road, Helena, MT
Tuesday, February 28, 2017

Aeronautics Board

Tricia McKenna, Board Chairman
Robert Buckles
Dan Hargrove
Bill Hunt, Jr
Fred Lark
Roger Lincoln
Walt McNutt

Department of Transportation

Debbie Alke, MDT Aeronautics
Wade Cebulski, MDT Aeronautics
Tim Conway, MDT Aeronautics
Mike Tooley, MDT Director
Carol Grell-Morris, MDT Legal

Guests

Pete Smith

Call to Order

Chairman McKenna called the meeting to order at 11:00 a.m.

Airway Beacons

Debbie Alke gave the Board a status update on the Airway Beacons. In January, Aeronautics updated the Board with a plan to maintain three airway beacons, MacDonald Pass, Spokane, and Strawberry. During the budget hearing before the Joint Committee of Transportation and Natural Resources, a member of the public spoke during the public comment time in favor of the beacons as a safety net for pilots and urged the Committee to require full funding of the beacons. Since the public comment, Representative Ellis from Helena introduced an amendment to House Bill 2 (the state-wide budget) called the Beacon Elimination Plan, reading “The Aeronautics Division will use a public process to develop a plan for maintaining a system of aeronautical beacons across the state, taking into consideration continued reliance on beacons by pilots across the state. The Division will report on the plan and the implementation of the plan at the Revenue and Transportation Interim Committee throughout the interim beginning in June of 2017.” The amendment passed unanimously. The budget moves to House Appropriations next week and Aeronautics desires to strike the amendment and continue to operate the division with the funds that are available with high priority work to serve the aviation customers across the state.

The Aeronautics Board discussed the current position of the status of the Montana Airway Beacons.

- Cost - Dan Hargrove asked what the financial cost would be of the amendment going forward. Debbie Alke responded that it is estimated that with routine maintenance, electricity, and leases that it costs about \$35,000 per fiscal year. The unknown cost is future maintenance and or upgrade costs such as fire hazard precautions, powerlines, etc.

- Safety - The Board discussed if there is a safety component to the beacon system and the increased liability risks if the beacons are maintained. Montana originally started with 90 beacons across the state and have been gradually reduced to 17. Aeronautics did internal research looking at nighttime visual flight rules (VFR) accidents in Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana and found that Montana fared better than one state and about equal with the other. Additionally, the FAA has stated that less than seven percent of the VFR pilots fly at night nationwide.
- Montana Pilots Association (MPA) newsletter – The June edition of the MPA’s newsletter had an article stating that pilots would volunteer labor to help with beacon maintenance and the cost to decommission the beacons would be anywhere from \$500,000 to \$1 million. Aeronautics believes that it would cost just over \$500,000 to recover and reclaim the land for all 17 beacons.
- Nostalgia – Aeronautics does have MacDonal Pass on the National Historic Registry. Aeronautics would be happy to work with historical groups if they would be willing to take over the beacons.
- VFR FAA Charts – The Montana beacons are noted on the FAA charts as a navigation beacon. The FAA is concerned that the course lights on the beacons lead to nowhere and would like the beacons removed from the sectional charts.

Public Comment

- *There was no public comment.*

Walt McNutt made a motion that the Aeronautics Board support the Aeronautic Division in the continued maintenance of the Strawberry, Spokane, and MacDonal Pass beacons to the extent considered feasible by the Division for the sole purpose of providing a nostalgic navigable segment of beacons. Robert Buckles seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

Being no other business, the meeting was adjourned at 11:30 a.m.

Tricia McKenna, Chairman

Roger Lincoln, Secretary