



A key component of our community is Witham Field, the county-owned, county-operated General Aviation airport that is located in Stuart, Florida. Witham Field encompasses more than 740 acres, which includes a variety of airport-related facilities (e.g., three runways, hangars for private and local governmental aircraft, administrative offices, a control tower, two fixed base operators, etc.). Preserve areas, forested margins and the Martin County Golf Course serve as buffers between the airport operations and the majority of county residents.

The operation and management of Witham Field is under the authority of the Martin County Board of County Commissioners, and is funded primarily through leases, fuel sales, and state and federal grants. Martin County has been successful in acquiring numerous state and federal grants from the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) and/or the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for airport operations and upgrades. Other projects have included home buyouts, home insulation installation, and airport safety improvements.

In recent years, Witham Field has averaged approximately 90,000 operations per year, with most being single-engine or dual-engine propeller aircraft. As the number, type and size of personal and corporate jet aircraft increased, measures to protect the health and safety of residents were undertaken by the Martin County Commission. A number of previously-existing homes that were within the Runway Protection Zones have been acquired and demolished; in addition voluntary noise abatement procedures have been adopted.

This Guardians position paper addresses three issues that are timely regarding the management of Witham Field: 1) A proposed Customs Facility; 2) the withdrawal of federal funding for the continued operation of the Control Tower; and 3) the Airport Master Plan.

The Guardians recognize the many positive aspects of having a community friendly General Aviation airport at a strategically important central location. Ease of access for arrivals and departures and the jobs provided by aviation-related businesses on the airport property and in the vicinity are valuable potential components and benefits provided by Witham Field to the community.

Customs Facility

The Guardians support growth within Martin County's existing designated Urban Services Districts (which includes Witham Field). We are concerned, however, that economic analyses used to project the necessary funds for the construction and operation of the proposed Customs Facility are inaccurate. We feel that a Customs Facility cannot be self-sustaining through user fees alone. A component used in the projection of the

necessary income needed to build and operate the facility was projected to be derived from boaters. We fear the estimate is exaggerated, as it does not consider that boaters have other options available at no cost. Those options include clearing customs at the Port of Palm Beach or the Customs Facility at Ft. Pierce and by using the Local Boater Option (LBO), which is available to all boaters returning from international waters and administered at no cost.

Bids received to construct the facility have ranged from nearly \$1.2 to 1.5 million and the long-term operation of the facility is projected to cost in excess of \$300,000 per year. The potential increase in economic revenue of allowing international flights, in our opinion, does not outweigh the drawbacks of the operating costs of the facility and the increase in air and noise pollution that would be associated with gaining prominence as an international airport.

For these reasons, and because the federal government has indicated their unwillingness to provide financial support for this facility, we believe that Martin County taxpayers may end up subsidizing this facility. We agree with the editorial Board of the Stuart News, who, on February 1, 2013 stated that: "A Customs facility at Witham Field must be self-supporting. County taxpayers shouldn't be asked to subsidize this venture."

The Guardians are opposed to the construction and operation of a Customs Facility at Witham Field, and we urge our supporters to voice their opposition to the County Commissioners.

Control Tower

The vast majority of airports in the United States operate without control towers. In March, 2013, the FAA announced that it would no longer provide financial support for the operation of contract control towers at 149 low-activity airports. Witham Field is one of the airports scheduled for defunding in September 2013, at the end of the 2012-13 Fiscal Year.

The Guardians believe that communities with fully-staffed airport control towers are safer than airports without control towers, but Witham Field would not become an unsafe airport without its control tower. In Martin County, air traffic controllers also serve the community and its residents by advising pilots of the voluntary curfews and desired runway approach corridors and encouraging pilots to meet these operational standards, a process that may not be followed if input on local flights was provided solely by automated systems or air traffic controllers at Palm Beach International Airport.

The Guardians encourage the Airport Manager and the County Commission to collaborate to identify and implement income-generating opportunities through which the operation of the control tower can be funded without use of ad-valorem taxpayer funds. Adoption of user fees, landing fees, fuel flowage fees and increases in lease fees are options that should be considered. We do not support using revenue generated by Martin County taxpayers to support the operation of Witham Field's Control Tower.

Witham Field Master Plan

The Guardians are concerned that Witham Field is being operated pursuant to an Airport Master Plan that was recently updated without the necessary community input and which has not been approved by either the existing Board of County Commissioners or the Federal Aviation Administration. We oppose initiatives presently being discussed that would replace existing vegetated buffers with noise barrier walls and/or berms. We believe that preserve(s) should be designated and managed in a manner consistent with the Preserve Area Management Plan requirements contained in the Martin County Comprehensive Growth Management Plan.

The Guardians support having the sitting County Commission re-open the Witham Field Airport Master Plan for review and input by the community.

In an effort to keep Witham Field as a community asset that does not require taxpayer subsidies, the Guardians concur with recommendations that will:

1. Enhance airport revenues by increasing lease fees and investigating landing fees and other means, so that airport will not be a tax burden to Martin County residents,
2. Take appropriate measures to move noise contours in excess of 60 DNA back onto airport property,
3. Ensure that the Airport Element of the Comprehensive Plan is followed,
4. Enforce the existing voluntary curfews by the strongest means available,
5. Ensure that an Airport Business Plan is regularly updated and followed,
6. Require an annual audit to produce a publicly-available balance sheet of income and expenses and which specifically identifies the use of any taxpayer funds, and
7. Implement any upgrades that may be necessary to ensure that the management of stormwater and airport-related materials adequately protects surface waters, groundwater and adjoining residences and businesses from contamination.

The Guardians of Martin County are a non-partisan, not-for-profit 501(c)3 community conservation organization dedicated to preserving the Martin County Difference through education and advocating compliance with Martin County's Comprehensive Growth Management Plan (Comp Plan).

The Guardians support other environmental conservation organizations such as the Indian Riverkeeper and the Martin County Conservation Alliance, and we work collaboratively with these and other groups to protect our water and our quality of life.