

# Thurston and Pierce counties become focus of search for new 2-runway airport site

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**CORRECTION:** The three areas being considered for an airport are 6 miles in diameter. A previous version erroneously used the term radius. One site southeast of East Olympia in Thurston County and two rural expanses of land in Pierce County are among three so-called “greenfield” sites still under consideration for a new airport after a state commission on Friday narrowed the options it will consider. The state Legislature has tasked the Commercial Aviation Coordinating Commission with recommending a site where flight operations can be established to accommodate growing passenger and cargo traffic in the region.

The commission, which was tasked by state lawmakers in 2019 with identifying a potential home for a new airport to be constructed by 2040, voted to analyze the viability of developing land in central Thurston County, as well as “Pierce County East” and “Pierce County Central” sites. The three sites were among a list of 10 greenfield locations — which means they are undeveloped land — that were being considered for the undertaking. Seattle-Tacoma International Airport is now expected to be able to support estimated passenger and cargo volume growth in the future.

On Friday, the three sites were chosen for further study to determine whether they would be appropriate fits for a two-runway airport, which would be roughly 3,100 acres, according to an August site selection study by state consultant Kimley-Horn. A primary 11,000-foot-long runway would be capable of serving domestic commercial passenger and cargo airplanes. The coordinating commission also homed in on exploring adding capacity at Paine Field in Snohomish County. The airport was one of six existing airports being considered for a potential expansion. The decision by the coordinating commission Friday essentially reduces more than a dozen options for a possible new or expanded airport in the region to four, with the 15-member body of state, industry and community representatives expected to make a final recommendation in June.

“Thurston County Central” is a six-mile diameter area southeast of East Olympia, according to the consultant’s site selection study. “Pierce County East” is the name given to a six-mile diameter area south of Graham, inclusive of state Route 161. “Pierce County Central” refers to a six-mile diameter of land located south of South Creek in an area inclusive of where state Routes 702 and 7 converge.

**COUNTY LAWMAKER OPPOSED** The prospect that a major airport could be built in Pierce County has worried state and county representatives who raised concerns about necessary infrastructure upgrades, noise, environmental impacts and disrupting the rural character south of Tacoma. County Council member Amy Cruver, whose district encompasses the two areas under study and who opposes

construction of a new airport there, said the decision Friday did not catch her by surprise. “I was like, ‘OK, now what’s next?’ I wasn’t shocked. I maybe prepared for that ahead of time, figuring that’s my luck,” she said. “It’s huge, and it’s anti-everything that everybody has worked for. It’s very disheartening.”

Cruver said there were sure to be repercussions in nearby communities, including her own, and that she was still researching what the county must do to prevent it from coming to fruition. “Not only is it a concern for my constituents, I’ve got skin in the game, too,” she said. “That’s what’s going to be in my nightmares for the next month, trying to figure out how to get information to and from my constituents.” During a public meeting last month, Rob Hodgman, senior aviation planner for the state Department of Transportation, which provides staff support and technical assistance to the coordinating commission, said that local government officials would have decision-making authority.

“Ultimately, the buck stops with them,” he said. OFFICIALS LIKE PIERCE COUNTY AIRPORT’S CAPACITY On Friday, Hodgman said in a phone interview that the “Pierce County East” and “Pierce County Central” sites were deemed attractive due to the potential number of passengers they could accommodate: 20 million and 19 million annually, respectively. Neither, he added, were close to existing airports. By 2050, the region is projected to see 27 million more annual passenger boardings than it can accommodate and twice the amount of current cargo demand, according to a May 2021 study by the Puget Sound Regional Council. “With Pierce County, we really don’t have an airport like Paine Field that can take on that need,” he said.

Both sites being analyzed also present obstacles, including proximity to military training routes, a relatively far distance from Interstate 5 and an even further distance from downtown Seattle for cargo carriers. Existing floodplains and anticipated costs, which the coordinating commission has yet to officially estimate, are also hurdles, according to the state consultant’s analysis. The site in Thurston County that is still on the table would be able to accommodate significantly fewer passengers — about 8 million annually — and is roughly 10 miles east of Olympia Regional Airport, according to Hodgman. The potential that two airports could exist near each other is not unprecedented, he noted, citing Sea-Tac and Boeing Field, and Paine Field and Arlington Municipal Airport, as examples. “The challenge we have, that the public really needs to understand, is that the situation at Sea-Tac, and perhaps at Paine Field, can get really challenging for people trying to travel,” Hodgman said, referring to heavy, growing traffic. “By 2050, imagine what that’s like.” The coordinating commission believes that a two-runway airport could meet the anticipated traffic demand in three decades (one- and three-runway options were previously being considered), he said. It was possible that expanding Paine Field would be their preferred or secondary recommendation come June, as they seek to solve for growth in passenger, cargo and other aviation-related activities. The recommendation approved Friday also called for the commission to assist “other airports interested in pursuing regional commercial service.” Hodgman acknowledged that the commission has consistently heard public opposition to a new airport, but he said that it was an inevitable need, pointing to the possibilities of price increases, flight limitations and general gridlock, with a do-nothing approach. “So if we can’t stop it, what can we do to make it as sustainable as we possibly can?” he said, adding that he was speaking personally. This story was originally published September 24, 2022 12:01 PM.

Figure 13: Thurston County Central Representative Location



Source: Kimley-Horn