Bill Doesn't Fly With Airport Officials

By David Rice
Journal Reporter

Members of the Forsyth County Airport Commission say that they don't want the powers that Sen. Ted Kaplan is offering them.

Kaplan, D-Forsyth, filed a bill in the General Assembly last month that he said would make it easier for Smith Reynolds Airport to become a hub where air freight carriers could quickly load and unload their packages.

The bill would expand the size of the airport commission that runs the county-owned airport from five to seven members, change its name to an airport authority, and give it the power to issue bonds and condemn land that it needs for expansion. The changes would help the board make Smith Reynolds build structures to make it attractive to air freight carriers, he said.

But at their meeting this week, members of the Airport Commission said, "No thanks." The Forsyth County commissioners can already condemn property and issue bonds for Smith Reynolds.

E. Howard Cannon, the airport board's secretary-treasurer, said: "I just don't think we need that authority. We operate under the county commissioners, and we don't want the authority to be able to go out there and borrow money or issue bonds."

"I'd like to see it (Kaplan's bill) die," Cannon said.

Commissioner John S. Holleman Jr., who represents the county on the airport commission, asked Edwin L. Welch Sr., the chairman of the board, about the power of eminent domain that Kaplan's bill would give the airport authority.

Welch responded, "I don't think there'll ever be a need for it here."

Federal officials, though, are developing a master plan for Smith Reynolds that may call for the airport to buy the Mount Sinai Glorious Church of God on Manchester Street, as well as several houses that may be too close to the runways.

Welch said that officials at Smith Reynolds have tried to persuade air freight carriers to use the airport and that the Airport Commission is still interested in increasing its air freight business. But Welch said that he doesn't think that many air freight carriers would be willing to move their operations away from the Regional Airport at Greensboro to Winston-Salem.

Kaplan said yesterday that he filed his bill in time to beat a deadline for local legislation and that it will go no further unless it is approved by the county commissioners.

The bill was intended to make the Airport Commission more like other airport authorities in the state, he said, including the airport authority that governs the Regional Airport. "If they don't want to do that, that's fine," he said.

But he added that "as long as they continue to have that attitude, the airport is not going to be the viable economic presence in our community that it could be."

"I hoped that by giving them these powers, it might wake them up to that. But apparently that's not going to be the case."