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Airport board votes to give money to fight tower closure

BY FRAN DANIEL
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The Airport Commission of Forsyth County voted 4 to 1 Tuesday to give the U.S. Contract Tower Association \$2,500 toward its legal efforts to keep the tower at Smith Reynolds Airport open.

The association is challenging the shutdown of 149 towers throughout the country by the Federal Aviation Administration as part of the FAA's required \$637 million in budget cuts under federal sequestration. The association has hired attorneys and considered legal action to fight the closures, but

TOWER, Page A15

Tower

From Page A15

backed off after the closings were delayed until June 15.

"I think it's very important that this commission pursue every avenue available to it in order to keep the towers," said Thomas McKim, the airport commission's chairman.

The FAA said the towers would automatically shut down on June 15 unless an airport decides to keep its tower operating as a non-federal contract tower.

Bill Whiteheart, a Forsyth County commissioner who is on the airport board, voted against giving the \$2,500 to the association.

He said the airport commissioners should pursue help politically, asking the area's U.S. senators and representatives for support.

"We elected them to

represent us," Whiteheart said after the meeting. "It's their responsibility to make sure that correct decisions are made."

The airport commission also voted to ask the Forsyth County Board of Commissioners for support in asking North Carolina's congressional delegation to lobby on its behalf to keep the tower at Smith Reynolds in operation.

Andy Dale, a pilot who attended the meeting, was glad the airport commissioners approved the money.

"In the interest of safety, it is important to pursue all potential avenues that might lead to the preservation of contract towers in the National Airspace System," Dale said. "This issue will probably be resolved politically, but the threat of litigation sometimes gets faster results."

Bipartisan legislation introduced in the U.S.

Senate by Sens. Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, and Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., to prohibit control tower closures has 28 co-sponsors. Also, Reps. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, and Richard Hudson, R-N.C., have introduced legislation in the House aimed at keeping contract towers open.

In other airport commission business, Steve Flippin, the director of the Winston-Salem Air Show, which will be held Sept. 21 and 22 at Smith Reynolds, said \$50,000 has been raised for the air show so far. His goal is to raise \$100,000 to put on the event. The air show doesn't use the tower for its event.

In 2012, more than 30,000 people attended the show. Flippin expects an attendance of more than 40,000 people this year.

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