

Cuyahoga County Airport runway expansion expected to officially launch soon



A portion of the Cuyahoga County Airport is in Richmond Heights. (Associated Press)

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CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Cuyahoga County soon will officially launch a multi-year project to extend the runway at the county airport in Richmond Heights.

On Sept. 8, the county's Board of Control will consider awarding a \$4.5 million contract, part of the \$7.8 million first phase of the project that will largely involve grading, digging and excavation work, according to county Public Works Director Mike Dever.

The county plans to begin the work in February, with a targeted completion date of July 1, about three weeks before Cleveland hosts the 2016 Republican National Convention. The second phase, which would involve physically constructing the runway, is scheduled to begin on Aug. 15, 2016.

The project will be performed in four phases over the next three to four years, with a total estimated cost of about \$37.6 million. Ninety percent of the project is expected to be funded by the federal government, with the county covering the rest.

When it's done, the project will extend the airport's runway by 500 feet.

The runway extension, which has been discussed since at least 2009, is being performed so that the facility can meet federal airport safety regulations, according to county officials. Dever also said the average lifespan of a runway is 20 years, and the county last replaced the runway 30 years ago.

The county is intentionally structuring the first phase so airport operations are not disrupted during the GOP convention, which is expected to bring an influx of private planes, including corporate jets.

The airport also could be the site of VIP events during the convention — the Ohio Republican Party and Cuyahoga County Republican Party held a joint fundraiser at the an airport hangar owned by the **Cleveland Jet Center** during the week of the Republican presidential debates held here earlier this month.

"We're planning on being prepared [for the RNC] and having our facility being open and available," Dever said.

County Councilwoman Sunny Simon, whose district includes the airport, said the airport is the largest employer in Richmond Heights.

"I think it's important to have this airport because it provides us not only with economic development, but it's also a safe passage in and out of the county" in the event of a disaster.

The county airport, which opened in 1946, accommodates about 15,500 flights per year. A county study prepared in conjunction with the runway expansion projects traffic will increase to about 18,750 flights by 2032.

But county officials **say they don't expect the runway expansion itself to result in increased airport traffic**. They have said that even after the extension, it will still be shorter than 6,500 feet, the next milestone that would allow larger aircraft to land there.

The runway expansion project will consume several thousand feet of streams and ditches on airport property, as well as more than 200 acres of farmland and about five acres of wetlands and floodplain.

But it will not expand the airport's footprint, nor will it reroute any surrounding roads, as an alternative plan the county previously considered would have done. Commissioners originally recommended a plan that would have rerouted Bishop and Richmond roads, but the county abandoned the idea after it received negative backlash from the community.