

F.A.A. Cash Is Short-Term Gain

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Now that the election is over, the East Hampton Town Board is picking up a matter it dropped hastily last month concerning East Hampton Airport.

Fearing what would happen if a public forum about Federal Aviation Administration money was held just before voters went to the polls, Town Hall went into panic mode in October, scratching a hearing on the deal. Having avoided what could have been a political bombshell, the board now plans to go ahead with a request for a relatively modest amount of money from Washington for deer and security fences at the airport.

A large number of residents, upset about aircraft noise, have decried taking any more money from the F.A.A. because they say (accurately, from what we can tell) that doing so binds the town's hands in terms of meaningful control of the airport. Further, they say that the airport has a dedicated fund with a substantial surplus in it that could pay for the work, avoiding further entanglement with the F.A.A.

Exactly why the town board majority, headed by Supervisor Bill Wilkinson, wants the Washington handout is not clear, but there are a couple of possibilities. One is a fear that airport-noise opponents could someday gain the upper hand and curtail hours of operation or limit certain classes of aircraft. By accepting the F.A.A. money, the current board would make it more difficult for the town to gain the upper hand at the airport, something some of the current majority's backers worry about.

Another reason could be that the town needs money. The East Hampton budget relies in part on the use of surpluses to keep tax rates down. But when they are gone, taxes will have to rise or more services be cut. In the 2012 spending plan, for example, the airport's cash reserve is tapped for \$400,000, roughly 10 percent of its budget to cover costs associated with a seasonal control "tower," actually a trailer.

Mr. Wilkinson and his budget officer, Len Bernard, are in a difficult place, having cut taxes twice and reduced the town work force about as much as possible. This is why they remain interested in selling such town assets as Fort Pond House in Montauk and scratching together additional non-tax sources wherever they can. The revenue has to come from somewhere. This is insufficient justification, however, for a policy decision that many believe will harm East

Hampton in the long run.

With the consensus being that accepting F.A.A. money comes at the cost of local control, the East Hampton Town Board should find other ways to pay for the fencing.