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Echoing Concerns On Funding For O'Hare Expansion

The city of Chicago's plan for O'Hare expansion would be "devastating to the community" and "wipe out Bensenville," according to Elk Grove Village Mayor Craig Johnson.

The latest demands by the city could cost Elk Grove Village \$10 million each year as well as creating crippling financial impacts to school, park and library districts, he said. "They have to put the (Western access) roadway west of Elmhurst Road," Johnson explained. That would eliminate between 80 and 100 business and thousands of jobs. Besides the revenue lost by the town, other taxing districts that require the business park including Dist. 59 and High School Dist. 214 would lose between \$10 and \$15 million each year.

However, besides the issue of future losses, Johnson wonders where the city plans to obtain the money for the project. Jack Saporito of the Arlington Hts.-based Alliance of Residents Concerning O'Hare and the Chicago Chapter of the American Working Group for National Policy echoes his concerns.

"There's a lot of scheming and scamming," Saporito said. He explained the city asked the airlines to make up a \$270 million shortfall in Phase 1 of the project. "The airlines don't have the money," he said. "The airlines are suing Seattle-Tacoma Airport and LAX (Los Angeles Airport) because they don't want to pay the expansion costs."

Saporito spoke of the city's budgeting for the project that still uses 2001 dollars six years later. "Even if we take their projects to be true and their figures to be true, they've only put in a 3 to 4% contingency and that's just ridiculous. Generally it's 50%," he said. "This project is now running at 24% over. They say it's the lawsuits and that's just crap because they figured on that when they went into this."

Saporito believes the city got the expansion approved without proper budgeting or proper financing. "There has never been an airport expansion that's been rammed through faster than this one," he said. "The taxpayer has never been asked if they're willing to pay for this expansion."

That issue also concerns Johnson. He explained the city wants to increase the passenger facility charges from \$4.50 per person to \$6 per person. "That's an extra \$1.50 on every ticket nationally," Johnson explained. Chicago has expressed interest in a large portion of the Airport Improvement Project money made available each year by the federal government that all airports in the nation share for improvement use.

"That sucking noise you'd hear would be Chicago sucking up all the other airport improvements in the country," Johnson said.

Johnson hopes the national impact of those changes will prevent Congress from agreeing to them. He said the Airport Improvement Project money is lower this year even before Chicago asked for a lion's share of it. He also believes Congress will not tax the entire country for a Chicago project. "The chance of that is slim and none and slim already left town," he said.

Saporito's concern is that even without federal assistance, the city will continue to try to force through the expansion plan, giving the bills to the local taxpayers. "The city of Chicago isn't going to pay for it; the airlines aren't going to pay for it; it's going to be us paying for it."