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City Agrees to Craft New LAX Overhaul

In exchange for area communities dropping their lawsuits, most of the latest plan will be shelved. Rebuilding of a runway will proceed.

By Jennifer Oldham
 Times Staff Writer

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After 11 years and \$150 million in design costs, the city has shelved its latest plan to modernize Los Angeles International Airport and will start over to craft a proposal that will do more to improve security and refurbish the aging facility.

The plan had drawn criticism from the city's new mayor, poor reviews from security experts and lawsuits by airport-area residents. All but one of its elements will be reconsidered and some of the most controversial, including a check-in center near the San Diego Freeway, are almost certainly dead.

The airport intends to begin work early next year on the one project still on track: the \$300-million rebuilding of the southern runway complex, which federal officials maintain is critical to preventing close calls between aircraft. It will be the first major construction at the 77-year-old airport in more than two decades.

The city consented to review the \$11-billion modernization effort in exchange for a promise from airport-area communities to drop federal and state lawsuits that challenged the plan and could have prevented work on the runways.

As part of the deal, Los Angeles also agreed to try to slow passenger growth at LAX, study how to spread air traffic around the region, explore ways to cut congestion, and speed up efforts to reduce noise and air pollution.

The settlement allows the city to overhaul the outdated Tom Bradley International Terminal and install explosives detection machines in the airport's complex baggage system. These projects are separate from the modernization plan.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who opposed many of the major elements of the plan, will now have an opportunity to remake predecessor James K. Hahn's controversial blueprint for LAX.

The city and county of Los Angeles, three cities near the airport, residents and a small army of attorneys spent weeks negotiating the legal settlement, which will be announced today at a news conference on the tarmac.

"This is an extraordinary achievement," said Lydia Kennard, who is the new executive director of the agency that operates LAX and was instrumental in bringing about the deal. "This is heralding a new level of cooperation and trust between the parties."

Residents and politicians also lauded the deal, which was described to reporters in a briefing Wednesday, calling it "historic."

"For many, many years, it seemed very much a David and Goliath uphill battle, with not a lot of support from politicians and broken promises," said Jennifer Dakoske Koslu, president of the Alliance for a Regional Solution to Airport Congestion, a residents group. "It seemed like we were never going to succeed. I think we're all very pleased with the settlement."

Villaraigosa, who was widely credited with bringing the feuding parties together, hopes the agreement will placate airport-area residents, who despised the LAX expansion plan drafted by Mayor Richard Riordan and the revision offered by Hahn.

Jaime de la Vega, deputy mayor for transportation, said Villaraigosa made a campaign promise to settle the lawsuit. "He wanted to put this behind the city," De la Vega said.

On Sept. 29, the mayor called airport officials, politicians, residents and their respective attorneys to a meeting in an airport boardroom and asked that they set aside their differences. Nine weeks later, after many hours of intense negotiation, they signed the preliminary pact.

Settlement participants said Wednesday that the mayor could not have accomplished his goal without the help of Kennard,

his hand-picked airport director, who immediately began attending the negotiating sessions after she started at Los Angeles World Airports on Oct. 8. Kennard had been the city's airport director before, from 1999 to 2003.

The deal must still be ratified by the Federal Aviation Administration, the Alliance for a Regional Solution to Airport Congestion, Los Angeles County and the cities of Los Angeles, El Segundo, Inglewood and Culver City.

Local lawmakers said they were confident that their city councils and the county Board of Supervisors — most of which have received closed-session briefings on the agreement — would approve the deal.

"I think they will see the good in this for our city, just as I do," said El Segundo Mayor Kelly McDowell. "Everybody benefits, everybody gave a little and everybody got a lot."

McDowell and others hope FAA officials will decide within days not to contest the deal.

Donn Walker, an FAA spokesman, said: "We will review this agreement, but we won't be able to comment on it until we've looked at it."

Despite optimism that federal officials will approve the deal, airlines object to one of the most controversial elements — a plan to decrease the number of gates where airplanes park from 163 to 153.

"There are a number of complexities associated with the settlement agreement that was reached without airline input," said David A. Castelveter, a spokesman for the Air Transport Assn., an airline trade group. "We will conduct a careful and thorough review of the agreement."

Carriers do not support a reduction in airplane parking spots, he said. The cash-strapped airlines would be required to pay up to half the costs of modernizing LAX through higher rents and landing fees. Federal grants and fees paid by passengers would make up most of the rest.

Even so, airlines said they support the plan to move the southernmost runway 55 feet closer to El Segundo, widening the distance between the two parallel runways enough to create a central taxiway. Airport officials said the work should not delay flights.

They said the settlement also allows them to begin construction next year on several other projects. One of these is the \$410-million upgrade of the Tom Bradley terminal that includes expanded gates for the massive 555-seat Airbus A380.

Also on deck is a \$400-million project to overhaul the airport's complex baggage system and install explosives-detection machines.

"We're not losing any time," said Paul Haney, an airport spokesman. "We'll be improving the airport while we figure out what our next project will be."

To devise a new plan, airport officials will meet with residents and airlines to come up with projects that will improve security at LAX and update its worn-out terminals.

Rand Corp. experts have criticized the check-in center, saying it would make travelers more vulnerable to a terrorist attack. And passengers have long viewed the airport as one of the nation's most inconvenient and unkempt such facilities.

Several projects in the modernization plan, including a new terminal on the western edge that would replace the remote gates near the sand dunes and a consolidated rental car facility, are seen as likely contenders for any new plan.

But some of the most controversial proposals put forward by Hahn — including the check-in center and the demolition of Terminals 1, 2 and 3 and of parking garages in the central terminal area — are considered moribund.

Airport officials will not acknowledge this directly, however, because the massive check-in center must remain in play, at least on paper, to make the traffic analysis work in environmental studies.

If the city officially killed some projects, it might have to go through the lengthy environmental review process again.

Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl, whose district includes the airport, said the projects "that are bad, we're going to replace them, we're going to have alternatives."

In the settlement, the city also agreed to:

- Take steps to contain passenger growth if LAX serves 75 million passengers in 2010. If that threshold is reached, the airport will eliminate two gates a year for five years, reducing the total number to 153. LAX expects to handle 62 million passengers this year.

- Invite the FAA, the Southern California Assn. of Governments, airport operators and area counties to develop a plan to encourage airlines to spread air traffic among the region's airports, including Ontario International and the Palmdale facility, both of which the city of Los Angeles operates.
- Accelerate the disbursement of up to \$240 million to soundproof homes in unincorporated Los Angeles County areas, El Segundo and Inglewood.
- Begin a traffic study to figure out how to unlock congestion on roads around the airport and ask the FAA to allow the airport to fund up to \$3.3 million in intersection and roadway improvements in El Segundo and \$33 million in improvements to the Century Boulevard corridor in Inglewood.
- Ensure that myriad measures to ease traffic, air pollution and noise that were included in a separate agreement with residents don't fall by the wayside. These include the conversion of ground equipment at LAX to low-emissions technology and providing electricity to gates where airplanes park.
- Reconsider extending the Metro Rail Green Line to LAX.
- And spend \$3 million to remove abandoned asphalt streets on the dunes west of the airport and replace them with native plants.

For all its complexity, airport officials said, one of the most important things about the deal is that it allows them to start construction at LAX for the first time since the upper-level roadway and the Tom Bradley terminal were built in preparation for the 1984 Olympics.

"We got there," said Kennard. "No one ever thought we could get there."

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Holding pattern

Los Angeles International Airport officials intend to start construction early next year to rebuild the southern runway complex to prevent close calls between aircraft. Every other project in the \$11-billion modernization plan for LAX is now under review.

LAX modernization projects on hold

Central terminal area: \$2.22 billion.

After demolishing parking structures, build a new terminal on the site

Satellite terminal: \$1.78 billion

Add new concourse to handle larger aircraft, with connections to people mover and baggage system

North airfield: \$1.25 billion

Rebuild parallel runways to handle larger aircraft and construct center taxiway for added safety

Central check-in facility: \$1.18 billion

Build check-in center with people mover stations, 7,495 parking spaces and a baggage tunnel to terminals

People mover: \$1.1 billion

Construct elevated people mover to connect new transit center, check-in center, rental car center and existing terminals

North concourse: \$850 million

Build new north concourse.

International terminal: \$683 million

Add gates to west side of Tom Bradley terminal

Rental car center: \$476 million

Consolidate most rental car companies at one site

Intermodal transit center: \$293 million

Connect bus routes and Green Line with people mover; add 9,100 parking spaces

West employee parking: \$268 million

Build 12,400-space structure

Roads and communications: \$230 million

Improve streets and add new communications network

Communications and roads: \$143 million

Complete communications network; improve roads

South terminals: \$125 million

Modernize southern terminals

Fuel farm: \$56 million

Reconfigure fuel farm to accommodate new taxiways

Southeast surface parking: \$32 million

Add 5,470 long-term parking spaces

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Source: Los Angeles World Airports

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