

BARGE IN DIRT FOR RUNWAY? - IDEA FOR FILLING RAVINE IS BUILT ON CONVEYOR, NOT TRUCKS

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DES MOINES - Hank Hopkins has an idea that dump-truck drivers all over the region are going to hate.

The Lynnwood-area man wants to move the huge amount of dirt needed to create a foundation for a landing strip for a proposed new runway at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport. The soil - roughly eight Kingdoms full - is needed to fill the deep ravine just west of the existing second runway.

Rather than truck in dirt over nearly five years from as far away as North Bend and Maltby - as the environmental study of the runway suggested, Hopkins wants to barge the dirt to Des Moines Beach Park, then use an electric conveyer belt to carry it just under three miles uphill to the construction site.

Dump trucks, which would have to arrive at the construction site at the rate of more than 80 an hour during peak times, would clog roads, ding windshields with rocks, and stir up smoke and dust, Hopkins said, noting that his conveyer belt would just hum.

"It doesn't take much to figure out that this is a better way to do it," he said. "It could be done

in half the time. It's safer and it's quieter."

Just because it might be better, doesn't mean it will happen, though.

The city of Des Moines is so focused on opposing the controversial project that it might refuse Hopkins authority to set up the system.

Port of Seattle officials, who operate Sea-Tac, say they are intrigued by the idea and will seriously consider it if the runway is approved.

"It's a creative solution that certainly has merit," said Michael Feldman, director of aviation planning for the Port.

Feldman said Hopkin's system could deliver the dirt faster, cheaper and with less community disruption.

An engineer, Hopkins holds the patent on the modular system he wants to use at Sea-Tac. He designed it in the early 1970s to tackle construction projects that required hauling dirt out of areas barely accessible to traditional earth-moving equipment.

"It's a proven system," said Hopkins, who has used it at the Hanford nuclear reservation and on a Valley Freeway project in South King County. He also used it on the Tom Bigbee River project in Alabama, which required moving more than 145 million cubic yards of fill - more than 10 times the 14 million cubic yards Sea-Tac plans to import.

The fill for the Sea-Tac job could come from an old gravel mine at the King County Marine Park on Maury Island. Hopkins said the bank of the existing property is too steep to be accessible.

Removing gravel actually would improve the park, he said.

It also might come from other areas if the county resists, Hopkins said.

The conveyer itself would be 7-feet wide and built on a pathway that runs along the Des Moines Creek drainage area. A sewer-district maintenance road would be used for the foundation, and no private property would be affected, Hopkins said. The conveyer would be enclosed and fenced to keep children and animals away.

Des Moines, the Port and the sewer district own the land along the route, he said.

Hopkins' firm, the Wescot Co., has secured the right of way it needs from the sewer district. Partners in the venture are Vern Scott of Miles Sand & Gravel and Ernie Ferullo of Northwest Construction. And the Port, if it goes along with the idea, would grant access.

It's Des Moines that stands in the way.

City Manager Bob Olander said the city is not considering the conveyer system because it doesn't think the third runway will be built.

But even some runway opponents acknowledge that the conveyer idea is practical.

"Frankly, it's the only way to do it," said Al Furney, a Des Moines activist who has fought the third-runway project for years.

However, Furney predicts that the city would never grant the company the permits it needs because it wouldn't want to give up what little control it has over the project.

Trucking the dirt would not require approval from the city;

building a conveyer system would.

Hopkins insists he is not taking sides in the debate.

But if the project is approved, the city would be better off with a conveyer system than dump trucks rumbling into town each day.

Hopkins also said he would help the city create a nature trail and park along two parcels of undeveloped city-owned land by installing a tunnel under Highway 509, just south of South 216th Street. The tunnel would be needed anyway, for the conveyer system, Hopkins said.

"We know the runway is a tender subject out there," he said.

"What we're saying is if they have to take the runway anyway, the community may as well get some benefit out of it.

1) HANK HOPKINS 2) SEATTLE TIMES: PROPOSED CONVEYOR (MAP NOT AVAILABLE ELECTRONICALLY)

PHOTO: MAP

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Date: May 15, 1996

Page: B1

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