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Airpark runway may cost more

When the wind blows hard out of the southeast this spring, pilots coming into the Ocean County Airpark will make their “crabbing” approach – pointing into the wind as long as they can, until they are low enough for touchdown.

In June 2011, one of those wind gusts flipped a Cessna 305A upside-down as it came in for a landing, wrecking the airplane but not seriously injuring the two men on board.

Airport advocates talk about that incident as evidence of the need for a crosswind runway, and now Ocean County and the state Pinelands Commission are at the verge of an agreement to build it. But, beyond the usual considerations for northern pine snakes, tree frogs and other forest denizens, Pinelands commissioners could be determined to exact another cost in exchange for their blessing.

Ocean County proposes to use money from its Natural Lands Trust fund – the open-space program funded by a dedicated county property tax – to buy some 485 acres in the Pinelands to compensate for paving the new runway and disturbing wildlife habitat.

That makes for some very unhappy Pinelands commissioners, who say the rare act of allowing major construction in the

Pinelands preservation area demands that the county dedicate new funding for the land purchase, above and beyond what it now spends on general open space projects.

“If you take this money, you just shortchange what the public thinks that money will buy,” commissioner Robert Jackson said Friday, as commissioners examined a draft agreement written by their staff.

Environmental activists went further, calling it a misuse of the trust fund. “We were to save land for development ... not to promote development,” said Theresa Lettman of Manchester, who was one of the original Ocean County trustees when the fund was set up in 1998, and now works for the Pinelands Preservation Alliance.

“You can’t use the money to satisfy a permit requirement for destroying natural resources,” complained Emile DeVito, the New Jersey Conservation Foundation’s science director.

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“Otherwise, you turn the open-space fund into a mitigation bank for development,” DeVito said, adding that other local governments have tried similar actions recently. “Until now, nobody had the audacity to raid the public trust like that.”

Ocean County Planning Director David McKeon says the county government has been acting in good faith with the Pinelands Commission, agreeing up front to certain conditions proposed by the staff instead of insisting on analysis and studies that would delay the crosswind runway beyond the five years already spent planning.

“It’s been a long, long process and the commission made the right decision to move it forward,” McKeon said Friday, after a commission panel voted to leave the land fund question open and send the proposed agreement out to a public hearing.

If the commission approves an agreement in May, the county can apply for a grant from the Federal Aviation Administration for 90 percent of the \$7 million project.

The 822-acre airpark property is an anomaly in the highly regulated preservation and forest area – the core of the nearly 1-million-acre Pinelands protected zone, mostly forest where little more commercial development other than cranberry and blueberry farming is allowed.

The small airport operation is rooted in Ocean County’s ambitious economic development plans in the 1960s, which for a time included a new city center in

western Lacey and high-speed roadways across the pines.

Clearing work for the crosswind runway started in the early 1970s, but without money to finish the project it lay fallow and 40 years’ worth of new growth is there now, McKeon said.

Besides the crosswind runway, the county would build nine T hangars, small garage-like structures for single aircraft, and taxiways for moving aircraft.

Preparing the site means clearing 17 acres, and hiring tree surgeons to trim the tops across 120 acres of the runway approaches, according to the proposed agreement.

Commission staffer Stacey Roth says thinning the woods could in theory improve the habitat for northern pine snakes.

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