

# Bowman Field tree cutting to speed up, expand



[James Bruggers](#), @jbruggers 9:25 a.m. EDT April 27, 2016

*Letter to Bowman Field neighbors says airport is preparing to acquire additional airspace easements and trim or remove more trees without FAA approval of environmental reviews.*

## STORY HIGHLIGHTS

*Trees continuing to grow, safety needs are paramount, and pilots are complaining, says official.*

*Critic of plan says neighbors are willing to discuss and reach a resolution.*

*Local officials say FAA has been slow to act.*

*FAA official declined immediate comment.*

Tired of waiting for Federal Aviation Administration approval for \$2 million in federal funding, Louisville officials are preparing to [expand tree removal around Bowman field](#) first announced four years ago amid much local uproar - cutting short a federal environmental study.

Skip Miller, Louisville Regional Airport Authority executive director, complained about FAA "timidness" in recognizing the need to make sure airport approaches are [safe for pilots and neighbors from trees that grow in protected airspace](#) - even as he said FAA sent out a memo last year encouraging airports to make sure flight paths around airports are clear.

An FAA spokeswoman said she was not able to immediately answer a reporter's questions about the matter.

[Recent tree cutting and trimming](#) around the general aviation airport has been in airspace easements already owned by the airport authority, which runs Bowman Field in addition to Louisville International Airport.

[Bowman Field residents](#) are now being told in a letter that airport managers are prepared to go ahead and acquire additional airspace easements and trim or remove more trees on their own, "without federal funds and without waiting for the completion of FAA evaluations." The trigger, said Miller in an interview, will be if the FAA fails to meet what he has called its most current timeline - finishing all cultural and environmental studies and signing off on the project by July 14.

The group Plea for Trees, which has closely monitored the authority's and FAA's actions and has sought to make sure local and federal officials follow environmental and historical preservation laws, has responded with concern and a warning.

"To the extent that the LRAA really intends to attempt to acquire easements and cut trees in a manner that skirts any further federal and public review, the action is unnecessarily provocative and will provoke with absolute certainty a legal response," said Louisville attorney Tom FitzGerald, director of the Kentucky Resources Council.

But Miller said with trees continuing to grow, safety needs are paramount, and pilots are complaining.

"Today the approaches are clearer than they were four months ago, but they are not cleared," he said.

Some 108 trees additional trees have been identified as needing to be cut or trimmed, he said.

When asked why project review has taken several years, Miller said "the FAA has approached this process with an abundance of caution because this is a rather unusual project," he said. "It's not a cookie-cutter project."

The Courier-Journal in 2012 reported that a top regional FAA official called the effort a "huge tree removal initiative" that was only "loosely based on" FAA regulations - and one that was "very controversial because of older and historic homes and neighborhoods surrounding the airport."

The extent of planned tree work turned out to be less than originally proposed. Still, the authority's board has responded to delays by putting in place "a contingency plan, if the most recent schedule cannot be met," said Trish Burke, authority spokeswoman. "This was based on the fact that, in the last 12 months, there have been five schedule changes" by the FAA.

Attorney Leslie Barras, who is also working with Plea for Trees, said she's been surprised by the slow pace as well, noting it took officials four years to start a historic property study - a study that remains disputed.

She said a full range of alternatives, including shortening the usable length of runways, has not been thoroughly evaluated.

"It's truly hard to say what's been going on," she said. "We all want a resolution. We want to sit down, and have a resolution and be done with it."

For his part, Miller said the historical review is done, awaiting to be sent from the FAA to state historic preservation officials for their concurrence. He also said he considers the environmental assessment completed, adding that the authority and its consultants delivered its second draft to the FAA in February.

The authority expects FAA to release that study for public comment on May 27 and then hold a public hearing and approve the project by July 14, Miller said.

If they don't, he said the authority is willing to complete the \$4 million project without a previously anticipated \$2 million in federal funding.

Barras and FitzGerald called that timing a rush job at the end of a process that's not engaged the public.

FitzGerald said it allows for an "unreasonably short time period for adequately responding to public comment and for FAA approval."

Barras said the "schedule seems concocted to exclude broader public input and involvement."

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