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Peotone idea set for takeoff

Gov. Pat Quinn is raising hopes and fears anew with his support for a third airport near Peotone, a moribund issue for months.

"We will build a third airport in the south suburbs of Chicago and we will build it as fast as humanly possible," Quinn said Wednesday in his budget speech.

The state began buying land for a 5,200 acre, one-runway airport in 2002 and has spent about \$29 million acquiring more than 2,000 acres. The acquisitions slowed to a mere trickle in 2007 and 2008 but a Quinn spokesman confirmed that \$100 million has been allocated to buy land for the project in the governor's proposed \$26 billion Illinois Jobs Now capital program.

The resurgence of the project troubled Wendall Smith, who owns a farmhouse and 100 acres near Beecher in the airport footprint. Smith is part of a residents' group that has steadfastly fought locating a third airport in their quiet, rural area.

"I have no intention of selling," said Smith, whose family settled the property in 1873.

But for Elk Grove Village Mayor Craig Johnson, the governor's statement was welcome news. Building a third airport near Peotone is a better idea than expanding O'Hare International Airport, said Johnson, who along with Bensenville opposes the O'Hare building project.

"I'm optimistic," Johnson said, adding the caveat that he hoped Quinn threw his support behind the Abraham Lincoln National Airport Commission to operate the airport. ALNAC is a coalition of towns comprising Elk Grove Village, University Park, Park Forest, South Holland, Calumet Park that is backed by U.S. Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr.

The government of Will County also is competing to run the third airport.

"All it takes is one signature and we will have an economic engine in the south suburbs," Johnson said.

DePaul University aviation expert Joseph Schwieterman is a "cautious supporter" of Peotone. He noted that advancing construction of a third airport simultaneously with a costly O'Hare modernization program has risks.

"It is an odd time to talk about airport construction with a double-digit decline in (air travel)," said Schwieterman, who runs the Chaddick Institute for Metropolitan Development. The number of passengers on U.S. airlines in 2008 declined from 2007 by 28.2 million, the government reported Friday.

But in the long term, "when you plan for an airport, you're looking out 30 to 40 years," Schwieterman said, "so the case is compelling."

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