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Imperial County eager, but hurdles persist

By Jeff Ristine
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Although Imperial County's unemployment rate is routinely among the highest in California, the commercial center of its biggest city, El Centro, is positively bustling.

A retail surge along Imperial Avenue – a Target on one side, a Kmart on the other – is causing traffic jams unheard of just a few years ago. South of Interstate 8, there's a Home Depot, a regional mall and housing construction that is pushing toward the Mexican border. Three-bedroom homes in one new neighborhood are going for about \$330,000.



SEAN M. HAFEEY / Union-Tribune

This nondescript, 2-mile stretch of the Yuha Desert in the Imperial Valley is among the proposed regional airport sites. Because the area is a fair distance from San Diego, officials are considering a magnetic levitation train to cut the travel time.

Agriculture still is big in the Imperial Valley, but economic development is bigger. The county has an enormous amount of space left for growth – enough even for San Diego's future regional airport.

To the disbelief of travelers who envision a two-hour drive over a 4,100-foot mountain range to catch a plane, the Imperial County Desert Site remains under consideration as a potential replacement for Lindbergh Field.

A hundred miles east of downtown San Diego, it would be farther from its primary market than any airport on the planet. But east of the San Diego County line, the proposal has political and popular support, including the Imperial County Board of Supervisors and 79 percent of its electorate, as measured by an advisory ballot measure in November.

"We've got the land, we've got water, we have the electricity," said Tim Kelley, president of the Imperial Valley Economic Development Corp. "There are some real opportunities."

For the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority, the desert site still falls into the no-stone-turned category, a location considered in part to deflect any criticism that it wasn't studied.

The site is one of several civilian and military locations being considered to meet San Diego County's needs 15 years or more in the future, when Lindbergh Field reaches capacity.



Under a legislative mandate, the authority must recommend a site in May and put it before San Diego County voters on the Nov. 7 ballot.

Rep. Bob Filner believes the military sites

will fall by the wayside and that when they do, Imperial County will be the only option left to meet the region's air passenger and cargo demands.

"Nobody in San Diego wants (an airport) in their neighborhood," said Filner, a Democrat whose district encompasses Imperial County. In the valley, he said, "the first thing you learn ... is how important new job opportunities would be.

"Virtually anything you want to do with an airport you can do in Imperial County."

For now, it's widely believed the footprint for the authority's analysis – a nondescript, 2-mile stretch of the Yuha Desert along the back road to Calexico, population zero – ultimately would have to change.

An analysis of the site, less than 15 miles from El Centro, reveals conflicts with military and Mexican airspace that could send jets as far east as Phoenix to line up for a proper approach.

The property, administered by the Bureau of Land Management, also is part of a shrinking habitat for the flat-tailed horned lizard, a protected species that has been pushed from other areas by agriculture and golf courses. This could doom any attempt to acquire the land.

"The chances of ever putting a foot there are slim and none," said Joe Maruca, a member of the Imperial County Board of Supervisors. "You would have a war on your hands from every environmentalist in the world."

He and others believe it makes more sense to look for farmland, which is plentiful.

In terms of convenience, the desert location falls to the bottom of any airport site list. Conventional wisdom holds that travelers don't want to spend more than 45 minutes getting to an airport. Only about two of every 100 San Diego County residents in 2030 would live within a 75-minute drive of the Imperial site, according to airport authority consultants. The average drive would be 90 minutes.

Filner wants to change the whole idea of "going to the airport" – not by car or cab but by "maglev."

A magnetic levitation train – such as the system between Shanghai, China, and its airport – could hit 270 mph and reduce a ride to Imperial County to 30 minutes or less. The Miramar area is often mentioned as a possible maglev station location because it is near San Diego County's population center; some say Lindbergh Field would make a good starting point, too.

Filner, who would like to see a train line stretch into Arizona, got funding from Congress for a study on issues such as cost and ridership.

Without maglev, an Imperial County airport would mean trading one of the most convenient airports in the nation for one of the least.

Denver International and Washington, D.C.'s Dulles International were derided early on as being too far away; both are roughly 25 miles from the population centers they serve. Japan's Narita International Airport is about 37 miles from Tokyo, a one-hour train ride.

The first part of the maglev study, commissioned by the San Diego Association of Governments, is expected to be released next week.

There are at least a half-dozen other maglev undertakings across the United States, including a 40-mile line from Baltimore to Washington, and a connection from downtown Pittsburgh to its airport. Both are in the pipeline for federal funding. Entrepreneur Sandor Shapery has been exploring a maglev system linking Lindbergh Field to Los Angeles International Airport.

The airport authority hasn't determined the exact route for a maglev line to Imperial Valley, but a consulting team envisions that it would run along the state Route 94 corridor at a cost of \$10.6 billion. Critics think the figure is

inflated, but the cost of projects proposed in other regions is estimated at up to \$95 million a mile.

One reason the airport agency is considering a desert airport is because the idea, improbable as it seems, has some history behind it.

San Diego and Imperial counties funded a study on a possible desert airport that resulted in a 215-page report in 1992. Maglev, still a test concept at the time, was mentioned as an answer to the distance problem, although the report was lukewarm on prospects for the airport itself.

The current airport study began in 2001 with a list of all the locations ever mentioned as possible airport solutions, so Imperial County qualified. The Yuha Desert location resurfaced in 2002 as a prospective site for a cargo operation after the San Diego City Council rejected a proposed expansion of Brown Field near the border.

By then, support was building in the Imperial Valley. The tiny airport north of El Centro was considered inadequate to meet civic leaders' dreams of a major expansion in cargo operations. A new airport also would serve the burgeoning economy of Mexicali, just across the border.

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"The first 20 years I was here, if you talked about industrial development you might just as well have been talking in tongues," said Orlando Foote, an attorney who has been designated a frontman of sorts for the board of supervisors on the airport issue.

These days, Foote said, there's a veritable lust for economic expansion, summed up as "jobs, jobs, jobs."

Kelley, the Imperial Valley economic development president, sees an airport and maglev as linchpins of a strategic alliance with San Diego. Imperial County, with a population of more than 152,000 as of 2004, could sustain high-tech research and development with manufacturing facilities, serving a major international trade corridor.

Working together, Kelley and others say, would allow any economic boom from the airport to flow at least partly west of the county line.

W. Erik Bruvold, a vice president of the San Diego Regional Economic Development Corp., said he understands the attraction of a two-county viewpoint.

"Our economies ... are becoming more and more linked, especially as more housing is built in Imperial for folks commuting into San Diego," Bruvold said.

But he added, "The challenges of building an airport that far away are really, really daunting. It's so far outside what has been done in other areas."

An out-of-county location also has been rejected by ASAP21 (Alliance in Support of Airport Progress in the 21st Century), a coalition of business, civic and labor groups expected to carry the ball on the campaign for any airport ballot measure.

Some of the hurdles to an airport don't seem terribly high in Imperial County, at least for the Yuha site.

For pilots, average visibility would be better than at Lindbergh Field. The impact of excessive noise would be zero. Residential relocations would be zero.

Electric transmission lines are less than a mile away. For water, a connection to Imperial County's West Main Canal would be just two miles. Both utilities are controlled by the Imperial Irrigation District, which supports the airport project.

Imperial Valley would be happy to become San Diego's top choice for an airport. It's an option that may become more attractive should Pentagon opposition ultimately dash hopes of a facility at a military site.

"Our sense here has been that the (desert) site was a bookmark and an attempt to demonstrate due diligence," Foote said. "It was never taken seriously."

"Well, we have taken it seriously and are willing to continue to do so," he added. "But it takes two."

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