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TD Photo ~ Megan Heyl

ASU Disaster Preparedness Education Director Deborah Persell speaks at the Walnut Ridge Regional Airport Commission's meeting Monday night. Persell and several others attended the meeting to talk about a proposed disaster training facility at the airport that would not only be beneficial to the airport's state staging area status for emergencies but also has the potential to bring in hundreds of students and emergency personnel weekly.

Disaster training facility could see hundreds weekly in LawCo.

**Megan Heyl
Staff Writer**

The Walnut Ridge Regional Airport Commission took the first steps at Monday night's meeting in an agreement with the Regional Center for Disaster Preparedness Education at Arkansas State University to establish a disaster training facility in Lawrence County.

Regional Center Director Deborah Persell and Major Brian Mason, as well as several other members of the team, were present at the meeting to give a presentation to the 40-plus in attendance.

The 80-acre facility will be located in the southern portion of the airport just north of Lawrence County Road 428 and will offer training for a variety of emergency situations, including earthquake, flood, tornado,

as well as programs such as FARMEDIC and HAZMAT training.

These programs will bring in students and emergency personnel from across the state and beyond. Walnut Ridge Fire Chief Frank Owens said this could be very big for the county in way of bringing perhaps hundreds of visitors into the area within a single week.

Having attended several trainings himself, Owens said it's not uncommon for the trainees to eat at the local restaurants or stay overnight in local lodging.

"I think there's a lot of potential for some growth in the community," he said.

Fran Cavanaugh, who spoke on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce, agreed that this was a tremendous opportunity

to develop industry the county has struggled to obtain in the past, particularly hotels and motels, as well as increasing the need for restaurants and gas stations. She added that another benefit is countywide impact as the program will require a satellite operation as well, which is set to be located in Imboden.

The Imboden facility will be used for rural training and will be developed alongside the one to be located at the airport. Persell said that the facilities would partner with people in the community to offer better disaster preparedness.

The strategic importance of the location was a driving force for the decision on building the facility in Lawrence County.

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Airport...

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Since the facility cannot only be used in training, but can also act as a command center in case of emergency.

With the airport already set up as a state staging area for use in natural disasters and other emergencies, having a facility like this nearby could prove invaluable. Persell said this would also allow many to train in the area they would be responding to in an emergency event.

With many local officials present at the meeting to give support to the program and support already received from Gov. Asa Hutchinson, Sen. John Boozman, Sen. Tom Cotton, U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford and the Arkansas Department of Emergency Management, the only roadblocks the program has left is Federal Aviation Administration approval and funding.

Commission Chair Don Cavanaugh said the commission will put forth its best effort to get FAA approval. "I, as the chairman, will back this thing 100 percent," he said. "We want to see this airport

grow, as well as the city of Walnut Ridge and Lawrence County."

Persell said as far as funding goes, they have already located many grants to apply for and will also accept donations, both monetary and in kind for labor and material.

The commission made a motion to allow Don Cavanaugh and Walnut Ridge Mayor Charles Snapp to enter into a memorandum of understanding to move forward with proposing the land for non-aeronautical use to the FAA. The Chamber will also need to enter an agreement with ASU to allow the lease of 20 of the proposed 80 acres required for the facility as it is part of a Chamber/airport land swap currently underway.

Also at the meeting, the commission:

- extended a First National Bank line of credit for 90 days. The line of credit is being used to fund work being done at the airport that will be covered through a grant upon completion.

- renewed the self-service system \$1,595 platinum agreement, which includes a parts replacement policy and required software that costs \$1,000 on its own.