Funds will help prepare airport for Flight Training Center

By MEGAN MOSELEY Tribune-Herald staff writer

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About $500,000 in state capitol improvement funds will go toward the Hilo International Flight Training Center at the old Hilo airport.

The project will include renovating the old Hilo Air Traffic Control Tower and adjacent building plans.

The funding comes after state legislators approved the final reading of HB 1700 last Tuesday, a measure dealing with the state supplemental budget that includes appropriations for several Big Island projects.

In the case of the proposed Hilo International Flight Training Center, the money will go toward “plans, design, construction, and equipment to establish the temporary site for the University of Hawaii at Hilo International Flight Training Center at the Hilo Airport,” according to the bill.

Jerry Chang, director of university relations at UH-Hilo, said some of the funding will go toward building classrooms and training areas.

Chang said the university is still looking for alternative funding after SB 3092 was deferred last month.

The State House of Representatives passed SB 3092 in April, but the measure did not make it out of conference committees.

The bill did not include a funding amount, but an earlier version of the measure asked for $450,000 for fiscal year 2014-15. Supporters of SB 3092 were hoping that the Legislature would have decided a final appropriation amount and the effective date before the end of this year’s legislative session on May 1.

The bill was related directly to the proposed flight center, which would work with UH-Hilo to launch a training program following three tracks:

• Fixed wing professional pilots.
• Fixed wing flight education pilots.
• And remotely piloted aircraft systems, or drones.

The degree would require eight semesters, which students could complete within 2.5 years.

Flight revenue generated from each student was estimated to be $13,923, with the school operating at a more than $200,000 loss its first year.

Last year, $100,000 was appropriated to begin the first steps into launching the center.

UH-Hilo Chancellor Donald Straney used the funds to hire aviation program expert Ray Bédard of Prescott, Ariz.

Bédard estimated the school could bring in more than $1.6 million in revenue by the 2019-20 academic year.

The program would also be offered to Hawaii Community College students, offering an Associate Degree in Applied Science in helicopter operations with 10 students starting in spring 2016.
The degree would require five semesters of classes, totalling 1.5 years of study.

Flight revenue of $13,934 would be generated per student at HCC, with the program losing $62,000 its first year. From there, revenue would grow to $1,455,000 by the 2019-20 academic year, according to Bedard.

Sen. Gilbert Kahele, D-Hilo, introduced SB 3092. He said he has high hopes for the proposed program.

“I’m very excited, very passionate and will do everything I can to fulfill the dream of someone who is very interested in aviation,” he said.

Bédard originally anticipated the first class of students to start next year; however, since SB 3092 was deferred, Chang said “that might be hard to do right now.”

Chang said the university is still planning on moving forward, and representatives from the school are looking for funding to hire another staff member for the program for next year.

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