



County Of San Diego

Board Of Supervisors

1600 Pacific Highway, Room 335, San Diego, California 92101-2470

Agenda Item

Date: September 16, 2026

06

To: Board of Supervisors

Reopening the Agua Caliente Airport and Exploring Alternative Funding Options (Districts: 25)

Overview

The Agua Caliente Airport is a public, single runway, airport located in East County approximately one mile northeast of the Agua Caliente County Park. For decades, the County has supported the operations and maintenance of the airstrip based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the State of California and County of San Diego. Due to lack of State funding and increased maintenance costs, the County decided in early 2025 to request that the State revoke of the County's operating permit and permanently close the airport. The public was given notice of the closure through a Notice to Air Missions (NOTAM). However, because there were no tenants or advisory committee associated with the airstrip, there was no direct stakeholder outreach or community engagement regarding the closure, leaving many airport users and interested community members unaware of the decision until after it had been made.

Since its closure many aviation stakeholders and community members have expressed interest in exploring the possibility of reopening the airport and potential alternatives for operations and funding. Aviation stakeholders have identified the airport as providing recreational access to Agua Caliente County Park and the surrounding desert region, while supporting wildfire response, emergency medical evacuation, military activities, and specialized flight training. Furthermore, it has been noted that continued operation of the airport could support visitation and economic activity at Agua Caliente County Park and that additional outreach and promotion could increase utilization of the facility. Between 2017 and 2023, the airstrip consistently averaged between 3,300 and 4,400 total takeoffs and landings per year. On May 20, 2026, the Gillespie Field Development Council unanimously voted to support the reopening and continued operation of Agua Caliente Airport, citing the airstrip's recreational, emergency response, and broader regional aviation benefits.

The existing operating agreement between the County and State is set to expire during Fiscal Year 2028-2029, creating an opportunity to evaluate whether a new agreement, partnership, or alternative operating structure could provide a sustainable path forward for the airport. Today's action will direct the Chief Administrative Officer pursue the reopening of the Agua Caliente

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Airport while also conducting stakeholder outreach and evaluating long term funding solutions. Lastly, staff is also directed to explore other alternatives that could allow the airport to resume operations and return to the Board within 60 days with available options.

Recommendation by Supervisor Joel Anderson and Supervisor Jim Desmond

- 1) Find that the proposed action is not a project subject to CEQA review pursuant to Section 15060(c)(2) of the CEQA Guidelines because the intent of the proposed action is to reestablish an existing airstrip and as a result will not result in a direct or reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment.
- 2) Direct County of San Diego Airports to conduct the following actions and report back to the board within 60 days:
 - a. Engage interested aviation stakeholders at each County operated airport including but not limited to: The Gillespie Field Development Council, The Gillespie Pilots Association, The Recreational Aviation Foundation, Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association, The Palomar Airport Advisory Committee, Fixed Base Operators, regarding the reopening of Agua Caliente airport and receive input, feedback, recommendations on runway rehabilitation, reconstruction, facilities improvements and general reopening of Agua Caliente Airport, and Airport Enterprise Fund expenditures;
 - b. Establish necessary steps to bring Agua Caliente Airstrip back into the County Airports network and any operational impacts including, but not limited to resource needs for runway rehabilitation, reconstruction, ongoing maintenance, additional staffing requirements, and ongoing funding sources.
- 3) While conducting the actions in Recommendation 2, direct the CAO to complete the following:
 - a. Determine, prioritize, and finalize any necessary infrastructure improvements including but not limited to runway and parking surfaces, repairs, and other maintenance required by or related to existing Operating Agreements with State Parks, the California Department of Transportation, or other such entity or individual that may have ownership interest in the land on which the airstrip is located and identify associated costs including but not limited to runway improvements, ongoing general maintenance, utilizing potential one-time funding sources, Agua Caliente County Park Funds, Airport Enterprise Fund, or a combination thereof;
 - b. Prepare all documents and processes for the completion of the reactivation, reinstatement, or establishment of a new Operating Permit with the California Department of Transportation, or such other State agency or agencies as may have authority over the permitting of airstrips;

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- c. Research any current or potential future ownership, leasing, or other existing contractual arrangements with State Parks, or other such entity or individual that may have ownership interest in the land on which the airstrip is located, and the County of San Diego.

Equity Impact Statement

By evaluating sustainable funding and operating alternatives, this item will help ensure that rural East County communities are considered in decision regarding regional infrastructure and public resources and services.

Sustainability Impact Statement

This item will enhance the County's fiscal and operational sustainability by exploring alternative funding sources and partnerships that could support the reopening and long-term operation of the Agua Caliente Airport. This action will help evaluate opportunities to restore access to the airport for East County communities and San Diego County residents while identifying a sustainable approach that minimizes impacts to existing County resources.

Fiscal Impact

There will be no change in net General Fund cost and no additional staff years associated with today's recommendations. There may be fiscal impacts associated with future related recommendations which staff would return to the Board for consideration and approval. It is estimated to cost approximately \$2M-\$3M to correct the deficiencies in addition to permitting, CEQA, and yearly/as-needed maintenance costs. An alternative funding source to the Airport Enterprise Fund (AEF) would likely be needed to maintain and operate the airport upon reopening.

Business Impact Statement

N/A

Advisory Board Statement

N/A

Background

The Agua Caliente Airport is located 77 miles east of Downtown San Diego. With a single runway, the airport is for limited use that accommodates general aviation activity. Since 2017, the airport has maintained over 28,000 total takeoffs and landings on the airstrip. The airport is owned by the State of California Parks Department but is part of the 120.7 acres operated by San Diego County along with the Agua Caliente Hot Springs. The County has maintained a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the state for 80 years, with the contract set to expire in two years during Fiscal Year 2028-2029. The County's Airport Division is responsible for the development, operation, control and maintenance of the airstrip.

Beyond general aviation, the airport has several additional uses and benefits. These include providing aviation access to Agua Caliente County Park and the surrounding desert region, an emergency landing location for aircraft operating in eastern San Diego County, and support for wildfire response, emergency medical evacuation, military activities, and specialized flight training. The Gillespie Field Development Council has also expressed that maintaining Agua

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Caliente Airport benefits the broader County airport system by preserving an additional aviation facility within the region.

Due to lack of State funding and maintenance costs the County decided in early 2025 to request the State to permanently close the airport and the State permit was revoked. No Federal or State funding is available to correct current deficiencies at the airport. It's estimated to cost approximately \$2M-\$3M to correct the deficiencies in addition to permitting, CEQA, and yearly/as-needed maintenance costs. If the County decides to reopen the airport, it is likely an alternative funding source to the Airport Enterprise Fund (AEF) would be necessary.

Reopening the airport would require an airport sponsor to correct existing deficiencies, complete applicable environmental review, and obtain the necessary regulatory approvals. According to the Gillespie Field Development Council, the Caltrans Division of Aeronautics has indicated that the airport's operating permit could be reinstated if the airstrip is brought into compliance with applicable safety standards.

Since the airport's closure, community members and airport users have expressed interest in exploring alternatives that could allow the airstrip to resume operations. This interest has included formal support from the Gillespie Field Development Council, which unanimously supported reopening and continued operation of the airport in May 2026. With the existing agreement between the County and State set to expire in 2028, there is an opportunity to evaluate potential partnerships, operating models, and funding sources that could support reopening the airport under a future agreement. Any option to reopen the airport would require coordination with the State as the property owner, correction of existing deficiencies, and completion of applicable permitting, environmental review, and regulatory requirements.

Linkage To The County Of San Diego Strategic Plan

This item supports the Community (Engagement) and Sustainability (Economic), initiatives within the County of San Diego's 2026–2031 Strategic Plan by evaluating fiscally sustainable funding and operating alternatives for the Agua Caliente Airport, whilst exploring partnerships that could maximize available resources and support regional preparedness and community needs.

Respectfully submitted,



Joel Anderson
Supervisor, Second District



Jim Desmond
Supervisor, Fifth District

Attachment(s)

N/A