

Tortoises on the move to make way for Flagler airport projects



Joe Young, left, estuarine field biologist and owner of Biological Consulting Services, watches and prepares to hand-dig as Gary Weaver, with the Jente Corp., scrapes away the surface of a gopher tortoise burrow at Flagler Airport in preparation to increase the runway safety area.

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PALM COAST — Biologists relocated a handful of gopher tortoises this week from Flagler Airport property to make way for coming projects that include a longer runway for larger planes.

Crews from Biological Consulting services and the Jente Corp., both out of New Smyrna Beach, spent much of the week digging the burrows — some 36 of them by mid-week — to find the endangered reptiles and relocate them.

“We’ve found seven,” biologist Joe Young, owner of Biological Consulting Services, said Thursday. “The burrows meander, so you have to dig all the way to the end to make sure there aren’t side chambers.” The relocations are being done in preparation to increase the runway safety area from 240 feet to 1,000 feet, Airport Director Roy Sieger said.

He referred to the area, located at both ends of the runways as “if needed” space, a graded area that provides a longer landing zone if needed. At its current length, the runway safety area meets standards set by the Department of Transportation but not the Federal Aviation Administration.

“This has been a long process,” Sieger said of the three years it took for the approval of this project,

and required “for anything built at the airport.”

S.E. Cline has been awarded the “fill and grade” construction process that will begin after the first of the year.

Sieger said many of the airport’s “big” projects were completed by December 2012, and much of what is being done now is “design phase” rather than groundbreaking.

Projects in the design phase include moving the airport’s primary runway 400 feet to the south and extending it 500 feet in length, to 5,500 feet, to allow “critical aircraft” planes that have more weight, whether passengers or fuel.

“They don’t just give us approval to building things,” Sieger said. “We have to justify the need.”

In this case, there had to be “500 uses” a year of large cabin private jets to show the need for a longer runway, he said.

It is the work on the airport’s master plan that looks five, 10 and 20 years into the future that most “excites” Sieger.

He expects the master plan to be finished this spring, hopefully in time for his fifth anniversary as director in March. Sieger is responsible for \$11.5 million in projects that are either completed or in the works, and the “green light” from the Florida Department of Transportation and the FAA for another \$15 million in the future.

“That doesn’t mean there is funding right now,” he said. “And, they would have to be approved by the (County) Commission.”

Sieger also said the airport could receive “fallout” money from FDOT that couldn’t be used by other airports and would otherwise be returned to the state.

“I’m hoping to get about \$350,000 to use for the design work for a new General Aviation Terminal,” Sieger said.

The current terminal will be around for a few years, at least, either way, he said.

“It would be three years out, minimum, before we could start building a new terminal,” Sieger said.