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100-year-old Monee man says he won't budge for third airport

BY A.JAY WAGNER Correspondent May 21, 2011 12:06AM

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Anthony Rudis, 100, whose rural Will County home sits in the footprint of the proposed South Suburban Airport, questions the state's attempt to force him out. | Joseph P. Meier-Sun-Times Media

One hundred-year-old Anthony Rudis has lived on his 614 acres in rural Will County for the past 42 years.

He's planted and harvested fields of soybeans and corn. He's dedicated 440 acres to one of the largest reforestation efforts in the state, creating a forest oasis through a government program in which the U.S. Department of Agriculture subsidizes him to protect vulnerable farmland.

He has devoted another 80 acres to re-establishing native prairie habitat.

Inside Rudis' rustic Monee home — converted from a barn — photos from his 68 years of married life are displayed, along with one from a visit to the White House to meet President Nixon. He has his honorary doctorate from Loyola University and various keepsake papers collected from his world travels.

ARTICLE EXTRAS



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Memorabilia and the fruits of a lifetime of achievements rest here. But what Rudis sees as home, the state sees as another chunk of property of the many it still must acquire for a proposed South Suburban Airport.

The struggle between them has gone on for 10 years, but Rudis thinks the state's latest steps to force him out have crossed the line of civility into intimidation.

'It's harassment'

Rudis' land is the biggest piece of property in the footprint of a proposed airport near Peotone that has been stuck in political limbo for a decade.

The airport is nowhere close to reality. The Federal Aviation Administration still has an environmental study to do, which it can't start until it collects key documents from the Illinois Department of Transportation. IDOT must also get its hands on 58 other properties besides Rudis' before it controls the 5,385-acre inaugural airport footprint.

Despite all that, a crew of engineers showed up last month to perform an offsite survey of the land, a routine step in determining a property's value in case IDOT has to use eminent domain to acquire the land.

Rudis said they parked a van at the edge of his property and walked the perimeter. He claims it was an intimidation ploy.

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"What are they going to observe? There haven't been any earthquakes or the development of sudden canyons," Rudis said. "Nothing has changed. They could have checked their records, but yet here they were."

He believes the state and Hanson Professional Services, the consulting firm hired by IDOT to lead property acquisition efforts, crossed a line of civility. He frequently gets letters citing a law that gives the state the "right to enter upon the land, buildings and structures of others," but his attorneys so far have been able to prevent the state from doing onsite appraisals.

Copies of the letters shown to the SouthtownStar often close with a plea requesting cooperation so IDOT can "ensure that the highest value is attributed to your property."

The wording makes it sound like the land acquisition is just a matter of time, and it's an offer Rudis has little interest in.

"It's harassment," he said. "The letters I regularly receive are an attempt at intimidation. It's been a barrage that's carried on for 10 years."

Regarding Rudis' claims of harassment, IDOT spokesman Guy Tridgell said, "We do not perform onsite appraisals without consent, and we have been entirely transparent throughout the process."

Where's the need?

Despite the ongoing battle, Rudis doesn't see himself as opposed to an airport as much as to an airport he considers unnecessary.

"I am not at all against the airport if it's needed," he said. "But there's no proof that there is a need. I've requested it, but I've yet to see a shred of evidence citing any report or finding showing the need for an airport here. You read the public relations and they intimate that (there's a need), but there isn't."

An expansion of O'Hare International Airport is to continue with \$155 million in new federal money after United and American airlines in March agreed to drop a lawsuit, and about an hour's drive from Peotone, the Gary/Chicago Airport could finally break ground on a key runway expansion in July.

Gary Oschenfeld, president of Shut This Airport Nightmare Down, also believes the plan lacks evidence of need and resents methods the state has used to acquire land.

"The majority of landowners within the proposed site are vehemently opposed to the construction of the airport," he said. "The state is acting irrationally."

But Tridgell pointed to the March approval by the FAA of projected flight forecasts as evidence of the airport's value.

"Mr. Rudis is welcome to request additional documentation," Tridgell said.

Rudis said the years of pressure have taken a toll on him and his wife Mary, who died in 2008.

He swept his arm around his living room, asking where he might relocate all of his life's belongings. Probably a condo and a storage unit, he guessed.

"It's been nerve-racking," he said. "It was really stressful for my wife. The constant overhang of the issue left her worried. She was always asking, 'Where would we go?'"

While the long-term answer remains to be seen, the short-term answer is "nowhere." As far as he's concerned, Rudis is determined to carry on defending his land.

"It's a political scam," he said. "You see politicians wringing their hands and crying in front of cameras about the deficit, yet they're spending hundreds of millions on unnecessary programs and empty ideas. I have no intention of leaving my land for that."

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