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Carlos Navarro

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President Enrique Peña Nieto Unveils Ambitious Plan for New Airport in Mexico City

by Carlos Navarro
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President Enrique Peña Nieto has resurrected a proposal to build a new airport for Mexico City, offering a much larger project than the plan that ex-President Vicente Fox proposed in 2001 (SourceMex, Oct. 31, 2001). Fox later withdrew the proposal because of a strong backlash from residents whose properties were to be expropriated for the new airport. Rather than build a new facility, Fox opted to expand Terminal 1 at the existing Aeropuerto Internacional de la Ciudad de México (AICM) in 2003 (SourceMex, June 4, 2003). Fox’s successor President Felipe Calderón also considered proposals to construct a new facility but ultimately decided to construct a second terminal building at the AICM in 2007 at a cost of US$655 million.

The expansions and additions to the AICM since 2003, however, have been insufficient to accommodate the rapid growth of passenger traffic in the past decade. Activity at the AICM has increased significantly despite the demise of Mexicana, one of Mexico’s flagship airlines (SourceMex, Aug. 4, 2010, and April 16, 2014).

In announcing plans for the new airport, Peña Nieto said the existing facility had reached its operating capacity, resulting in bottlenecks in Mexico’s air traffic. The AICM, the second-busiest airport in Latin America, recorded more than 389,000 takeoffs and landings in 2013, surpassing its stated capacity of 340,000. "[The bottlenecks at the airport] restrict movement around the country, limit Mexico’s ties to the world, put a brake on trade and investment, and create delays for users," Peña Nieto said in a 90-minute televised address to the nation on Sept. 2. The president said Mexico could not afford to continue "postponing a solution" to the overcrowded facility.

The first phase of the new airport—to be constructed on 4,430 hectares of desert land owned by the federal government near the generally dry Lago de Texcoco—is targeted for completion in 2020. The new facility, being constructed at a cost of more than 169 billion pesos (US$13 billion), is designed to serve 120 million passengers a year. The airport will eventually include six runways, but only three will be built during the first construction phase. "[The new facility] will be the biggest infrastructure project in our country in many years and even one of the biggest in the world," said Peña Nieto.

Renowned British architect Norman Foster and Mexican partner Fernando Romero, who designed the project, also spoke at Peña Nieto’s press conference. Foster has participated in the design of major airports around the world, including those serving the cities of Beijing, Hong Kong, London, Amman (Jordan), Kuwait, Barcelona, and Berlin, as well as the Wembley soccer stadium in London. Foster acknowledged that the Mexico City airport would incorporate aspects of his other projects but noted that the airport would also be "the first of its kind in the world."

Fernando Romero Enterprise, whose projects include the design for Museo Soumaya in Mexico City. Romero said the new airport would incorporate several Mexican symbols, particularly the eagle and the serpent that adorn the country’s flag. "The colors, the patterns are very special to Mexico ... and also the quality of monumentality in the works of earlier civilizations," Romero said.
The airport construction will be financed with a mixture of public and private funds, with revenues from the current facility and from the new airport accounting for a share of the government expenditures. The government also expects to issue about US$6 billion of debt on global financial markets. "All the projections indicate that this will be a highly profitable investment because the value of the assets will multiply," columnist Jesús Rangel wrote in the daily newspaper Milenio.

No land conflicts

Authorities appear to have avoided some of the problems that derailed the facility proposed by Fox, including environmental concerns and conflicts with residents of collective farms (ejidos) and other property owners in San Salvador Atenco. While the land proposed for the airport is relatively close to the community of San Salvador Atenco, the land is entirely owned by the federal government, and the site is in a less environmentally vulnerable location than the original location.

"Theoretically, there should be no problems with the construction of this airport, since there won’t be any conflicts with ejidos or private landowners," columnist Pablo Hiriart wrote in the daily business newspaper El Financiero. "But I underscore the word theoretically. There is always the possibility that someone with political motivations could step up to create problems."

Hiriart pointed out that part of Fox’s problem was that the former president sought to acquire the ejido land on the cheap. "When Vicente Fox attempted to build an airport in Texcoco, he was only willing to pay ejido residents the equivalent of 7 pesos per square meter," said the columnist. "That is an insult and an abuse."

Proponents also point out the bright employment outlook resulting from the construction of the new airport, including 50,000 direct and 150,000 indirect jobs during the first phase of the project. Communications and Transportation Secretary Gerardo Ruiz Esparza said the airport would spawn some 130 investment projects in the area, including expansion and modernization of highway infrastructure and other facilities leading to the new airport. Huge investments are also anticipated from the private sector, including new hotels and a convention center in the area of the airport.

"The construction of the airport, more than a major public-works project, represents a willingness for change," wrote political blogger Liébano Sáenz, who served as an aide to former President Ernesto Zedillo (1994-2000). "The project has brought together elected leaders, political parties, technical experts, and business groups. … This is a proposal that will serve future generations."

The project also received a strong endorsement from the International Air Transport Association (IATA). "This is a positive development," said IATA president Tony Tyler, who said his organization would offer its expertise to help create a successful and transparent transition from the existing airport to the new facility. "We waited a long time for this project to become a reality."

The government also took into account the environmental concerns surrounding the construction of a new airport. The facility appears to create fewer hazards for wildlife than the project that the Fox government had proposed for San Salvador Atenco. Studies showed construction on the previous site would have destroyed nesting sites for 27 species of migratory birds (SourceMex, Aug. 29, 2001).

Authorities acknowledged that the current location, which is primarily desert land, also poses dangers for some species of birds in the area, including herons and ducks. "We have several species that are important ecologically, and we need to find a way to conserve and protect them," said presidential spokesperson Eduardo Sánchez.
A green airport

Administration officials pointed out that the airport project includes plans to transform about 3,000 ha of the desert area around the airport into green spaces, which would result in a restored area that is four times the size of Mexico’s City’s huge Chapultepec Park.

"The new airport will be green and environmentally friendly and will also provide an opportunity for us to recover the area around Lago de Texcoco, which today is totally degraded," said Sánchez. A major goal of the administration, said the presidential spokesperson, is to promote planting trees and shrubs around the airport, which would contribute to reducing greenhouse gasses in the capital.

Environmental advocates, however, want to ensure that the project is truly sustainable and respectful of the environment. Several prominent groups—including the Centro Mexicano de Derecho Ambiental (Cemda), the Centro de Transporte Sustentable EMBARQ México (CTS EMBARQ), and the Instituto Mexicano para la Competitividad (Imco)—have requested that the Peña Nieto administration hold a forum that focuses entirely on the environmental considerations for the site. The groups want the forum to examine the risks for the environment and the implications for urban development of the new airport.

The organizations acknowledged that construction of the new facility has the potential to bring economic development, not just for the area surrounding the airport but also for the whole country. Still, the groups emphasized that the economic, social, and environmental implications of the project should be open to public scrutiny. "Transparency and accountability are essential elements to prevent corruption and enable a quality public discussion, ensuring that the government’s promise becomes a reality," the groups said in a statement. "This is especially important for a project that will span several presidential administrations."

The Peña Nieto government boasted about several innovative environmental aspects of the new airport, which officials said would become one of the most sustainable airports in the world. The architects have designed the facility to earn a LEED (Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design) rating, the highest environmental standard at the international level. Environment Secretary Juan José Guerra Abud said the terminal buildings would use clean energy exclusively for their internal operations and employ fixtures and other devices that will cut energy usage in half. "In other words, the facility will leave a zero carbon footprint," said the environment secretary, who noted that no other airport outside of Europe meets those guidelines.

Other environmental aspects of the new airport include constructing 24 new treatment plants, one each in the 21 communities around Lago de Texcoco and three others that will serve the region as a whole. Water-treatment and usage of treated water will rely entirely on clean energy, said the administration.

The master plan for the airport also includes the use of environmentally friendly materials in the actual construction of the airport.

Avoiding a "white elephant"

While the planned airport facility has attracted very little vocal opposition, there are some skeptics who wonder whether the project will meet the same fate as other recent grandiose proposals that did not meet expectations. These include Line 12 of the Mexico City subway and the huge Biblioteca
Vasconcelos in Mexico City, which had to close partially or fully because of construction flaws discovered after the project was inaugurated. "We do not know how to prevent President Enrique Peña’s masterpiece from becoming a white elephant or a bottomless well of irregularities," political analyst and journalist Ricardo Alemán wrote in his online news site La Otra Opinión.

Alemán also alluded to a recent interview he conducted with Eduardo Bohórquez, director of the organization Transparencia Mexicana, who said that the cost of the project could escalate, especially if contractors charge too much for materials or provide substandard supplies.

There were some questions about the proposal to locate the new airport on land that is considered soft, which could create problems with sinkage down the road. Terminal 2, constructed during the Calderón administration, was built to withstand sinkage of about 3 centimeters annually, when the actual sinkage levels for the site are about 30 cm per year.

David Cristóbal Acevedo y Juan Estrada Berg, land and soil experts at the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo (UACH), raised concerns that the site of the new airport, which is adjacent to the existing airport, might be subject to the same conditions. They said the problem arose because the aquifers in the region have been overexploited.

Soil instability could pose a problem in particular for the runways, which could easily crack and create sinkholes. Jorge de la Madrid Virgen, coordinator of infrastructure and transportation at the Colegio de Ingenieros Civiles de México (CICM), pointed out that the airport designers have addressed the sinkage problems. For example, he said, the construction process would include removing soil and replacing it with more stable material.

Some concerns were also raised about favoritism in the selection of the architectural team hired to construct the facility, particularly Romero, who is the son-in-law of Mexico’s wealthiest and arguably most influential business leader. "The merits of Fernando Romero—the successful operations of his company in seven countries, and his recent recognition as a leader of the future by the World Economic Forum—were not sufficient to avoid the accusations that his powerful father-in-law somehow had a hand in the selection process," columnist José Cárdenas wrote in the Mexico City daily newspaper Excélsior. "Romero will inherit the enemies and detractors of [Carlos Slim], in the same manner that he will certainly receive the professional and business support from his father-in-law’s business empire."

Cárdenas pointed out, however, that the magnitude of the project ensures that Slim’s Grupo Carso will get at least some of the concessions. "The total investment of billions of dollars will require the participation of Mexico’s construction giants," said the columnist. "This is not just a matter of constructing six runways and two terminals to accommodate 120 million users a year. The facility will need hangars, maintenance facilities, parking lots, and other infrastructure. This will provide jobs for 160,000 workers." [Peso-dollar conversions in this article are based on the Interbank rate in effect on Sept. 10, 2014, reported at 13.19 pesos per US$1.00.]