

Expansion plans draw local fire

Chiang Mai villagers suggest airport move

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Plans to expand Chiang Mai airport drew resistance from residents, who protested at a meeting with representatives of a firm studying the possible environmental impact of such construction.

People who live around the current airport said they would rather see a new airport in a less congested area of the province. A facelift of the current facility would affect their livelihood, they said.

The residents talked with representatives of Southeast Asia Technology, a company commissioned by the Airports of Thailand to conduct the environmental impact assessment that is necessary before any construction can begin.

Most residents appeared to favour a relocation of the airport. Enlarging the current facility will cause more problems, including air and noise pollution, traffic congestion and land appropriation, they said.

The planned expansion could affect about 600 households in tambons Mae Hia and Suthep in Chiang Mai's Muang

district.

Thanawat Yodjai, chief of the Mae Hia tambon administrative organisation, said residents were not against all development plans, but already faced environmental problems from the current airport and businesses set up to service air travellers.

Relocation was also the best option for the airport project, because a new site could draw more businesses, he argued.

Somjit Srikaew, who lives in the area, said she had to put up with problems caused by the present airport and expected more demands on the environment with more flights and bigger planes if the airport is upgraded as planned.

The airport handled more than two million passengers last year, and 15,000 landings and takeoffs.

A government policy to turn the airport into the country's northern aviation hub recommends adding 500 metres to the 3,000-metre runway, to service more flights. Plans call for improving the terminal.

Chakraphob Charassri, Seatec's chief of environmental analysis, assured residents their worries will be reflected in the EIA report. He expects to submit the statement to AOT next month, after hearing from all parties.