

Almon to step down from airport board

By TIM J. CHRISTIE
Of the Herald-Republic

Bill Almon, a Yakima attorney and real estate broker, is resigning from the Yakima Air Terminal's board of directors after nearly 13 years.

The resignation, submitted to Yakima Mayor Pat Berndt on Monday, was disclosed Wednesday and is to take effect at the end of the month.

Almon has served as chairman of the airport board since his appointment by the Yakima City Council in 1982.

In an interview Wednesday and in his letter of resignation, Almon said he is so busy with his law practice and real-estate business he could not devote the time needed to continue serving the airport.

"Because I see no likelihood that I will be able to again devote what I believe to be the amount of time necessary to chair the position, I believe the best course of action is to resign my appointment," he wrote.

He said he considered resigning as chairman and remaining as a board member, but said that would be unfair to the next chair, "with me hovering in the background," and create uncertainty among airport staff members.

When he and his wife, Joanne, who also is a Realtor, talked about it, he said, "We couldn't predict any better time" for him to resign than right now.

He said he looks forward to not working seven days a week, as he's done for the past 13 years. He used to go out to the airport everyday and spend about 40 hours a month on airport business. But recently he hasn't been able to spend that much time because his commercial real estate business has "gone gangbusters," he said.

Among Almon's real-estate concerns is property at the airport. In the February issue of Washington CEO magazine, he placed an advertisement for four acres available for development "strategically located inside the Yakima Airport property." The land is owned by Aura Inc. and zoned for light industry, according to the ad.

Last summer, after he advertised office space for lease at the airport, questions were raised by private citizens about whether that represented a potential conflict of interest, City Manager

Dick Zais said.

After those concerns were expressed to City Council members, Zais asked City Attorney Ray Paoletta to investigate. In an Aug. 9, 1994, opinion, Paoletta said he could find "no technical conflict of interest because Almon Realty has not entered into any contract with the airport."

In an Aug. 5 letter to Mayor Pat Berndt, Almon defended his listing of the building.

"While I would hope my years of service to the airport would have precluded any doubt about the matter, evidently that is not the case," Almon wrote.

The building in question is owned by Blaze Construction, which leased the land from the airport. The wife of the manager of Blaze Construction, an Almon Realty agent, asked Almon to assist in marketing the building, he wrote.

"The building is not owned by the airport. The airport board has no opportunity to approve its subtenancies, and the airport has not and will not, have a listing contract or any other arrangement with me ... which would result in a profit to anyone other than the

airport," Almon wrote.

Future ads would indicate that the building is privately owned, he said.

Maureen Hart, an assistant state attorney general, said Wednesday she knows of no ethics law that speaks directly to a situation such as Almon's.

"If it was a situation where you had a board member deciding to hire himself as the real-estate agent for the board selling airport property, that would be much more clear," she said. "I know of no statute that would specifically address the situation you are talking about."

Almon said questions about potential conflicts had nothing to do with his decision to quit.

Zais said Almon has done "an excellent job" on the board, "steering the board through troubled waters and a period of change and leading it to new opportunities for growth in the future."

Almon, a reserve Yakima police officer who ran unsuccessfully for Congress as a Republican in 1992, served on the board during the 1980s "when the airport was facing some very, very serious times, both financially and legally and otherwise," Zais said.

He helped lead the airport

through "severe financial distress" and through lease problems that make recent controversies about airport leasing policies pale in comparison, he said.

Almon also has saved the city- and county-owned airport "extensive amounts of legal fees" by providing his own legal expertise at no charge, Zais said.

"There are a lot of things that represent an individual who has given his all for that airport and the staff and the people that have worked there," Zais said.

Almon is one of two board members appointed by the City Council. Two others are appointed by Yakima County commissioners, and the fifth is jointly appointed by the city and county.

A City Council subcommittee responsible for airport-board appointments still has a number of applications on file from the city's most recent appointment, Bill Elkins in January 1994, Zais said. The subcommittee may review those candidates as well as any new applicants, he said. The subcommittee will then make a recommendation to the full council.

Anyone interested in serving on the airport board may be picked up an application at the City Clerk's office.



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