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County Executive adjusts airport security access to accommodate businesses

Pierce County Executive Pat McCarthy is adjusting the new security policy at the two county-owned airports after further consultations with pilots, tenants and other airport customers.

The county installed 24-hour gate security at Pierce County Airport-Thun Field in Puyallup last September in response to tenant concerns and several security incidents. A similar system is being installed at Tacoma Narrows Airport. Based on customer feedback after six months of operations, vehicle access gates will now be open between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. on weekdays. The change begins Thursday, March 26.

“We need to balance the ability of airport businesses to meet their customers’ needs with measures to keep the airports secure,” said Executive McCarthy. “After listening to input from airport commissions, businesses and customers, I decided that allowing access during weekday business hours is a reasonable compromise.”

With this decision, airport users will be able to pass through the gates during weekday business hours without having to use an assigned gate access card or call businesses from the gate intercom. Public Works and Utilities, which manages the airports, has the ability to restrict access during special events or emergencies.

In response to tenant requests, Public Works and Utilities used a U.S. Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security evaluation tool to determine the appropriate level of security for the airports. While security at general aviation airports is not required, it is highly recommended by the Federal Aviation Administration and the TSA. Pierce County surveyed 57 general aviation airports in Washington, and found that 36 have 24-hour security.

The Pierce County Council is considering codifying the Executive’s gate decision as it considers an update to airport regulations.

Councilmembers Dan Roach, Joyce McDonald, and Jim McCune met with Thun Field businesses last fall, and the Council held a listening session on the topic in February. The current version of Ordinance 2014-108s2 affirms the Executive’s decision to open the gates during weekday business hours. The Council discussed the ordinance on March 24 and scheduled final consideration for April 14.

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