

Lynchburg's Morning Show

MW: Mari White, Brian Weigand. Joining us now, the President of Liberty University, Jerry Falwell, Jr. Good morning!

JF: Good morning, Mari. How are you?

MW: Doing well! Thanks. Have several things we want to talk to you about this morning, including the proposed bell tower on the campus there as part of the campus renovations at Liberty. I think that a lot of sometimes people's reactions to something is largely what they see in a headline, because they might not read the entire story or hear the entire story, so I'm just wondering when you all came up with these plans. Did you present this as a "252-foot-tall bell tower" or did you present this as "the tallest building in Lynchburg?" 'Cause you know one headline sounds a little more, kind of, confrontational than the other.

JF: Oh, yeah. No, no, we have been building that new campus commons with the library. The science hall's under construction now and the music hall and then the new student center will begin construction this fall, but there's a lawn that's part of that commons that stretches from the other end, the other side of the Vines Center. It goes across the roof of the new basketball practice facility, it runs behind the DeMoss building all the way to the new softball field where the old baseball field used to be. One thing we kept noticing over the last three or four years as we've been designing it, is there was no focal point. There was no landmark that sort of caught everybody's attention. There were just a lot of academic buildings and other facilities and so we started. But there happened to be a hill, where the mansion is, right at the end of that lawn and it lined up with the sidewalks on the lawn, so we started thinking of different ideas for something that really—when you look at that structure—that's what you think of. I mean, when you think of Liberty University's campus, you think of that building. Just like at Duke, you think of Duke Chapel, or UVA, you think of the rotunda. There's always one building. I've been traveling around this spring to a lot of different universities, working on moving Liberty into another athletic conference, and I kept noticing that a lot of them—even the newer universities—had bell towers, or clock towers of some sort. The prettiest one I saw was at the University of South Alabama. It was just built in 2010. And so, we suggested that to the architects, and they went back and found a way to do it and make it something that served a real useful purpose as a tie-in to the new student center with academic uses; because of the natural beauty that surrounds the campus, if you go up, anywhere you go up high on Liberty University's campus you can see a beautiful view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and Liberty Mountain, and back toward the city. Because of that view, we asked them to, whatever structure they came up with, we asked them to make it as tall as possible because, because of those views—to take advantage of them. It just so happened that the overlay from

the airport—we're so close to the airport—the tallest they could make any structure at that particular point—these overlays go up at an angle from the end of the runway and you can't penetrate that plane, so to speak, when you're building something tall near the airport without a lot of difficulty getting approvals. It just so happened that around 250 feet is where, if you go higher than that you start getting into an area where it's difficult to get approvals, and so that's why we settled on that particular height. But that was the thinking behind it and the design itself will probably change. We're expecting some final, more final designs in the next few weeks and we're asking for input and suggestions from faculty and from staff. So that's sort of the background story.

BW: Well, now, you mentioned the FAA rules. Now, do you already have permission from the FAA? Do you still have to get that? And do you anticipate any trouble getting a permit from the city to build the tower?

JF: What the architects and the engineers tell us is that, I don't think there are any city ordinances that apply to height of buildings. I don't foresee any problems there. I told Kim Payne about this idea. He was probably one of the first people outside Liberty to know about it, probably six or eight months ago, but the architects and engineers tell us that the height, if we keep it 250 or less, that the approvals are pretty much automatic with the FAA. You just have to put certain lights on the tops of the buildings, just like we had to do on the medical school. If you notice, at night, there are red and green lights on that building. That's the reason for that.

MW: How about from the city? Permits from the city?

JF: I think I said, there are no height ordinances that I know about from the city.

MW: So, the student center itself, nothing will require ...?

JF: Oh, oh. No, it's all university uses and that's all covered by our existing zoning and the new IN-2 zoning that we worked hard with the city to create a couple of years ago. We're moving into that or applying for that category soon, too, so that would also cover it.

MW: So, the city would have to give you the building permits, would have to approve the building permits, right?

JF: Yeah. Every building that anybody builds, you have to take in the plans—

MW: Do you think that the height of the tower might cause any controversy?

JF: I wouldn't think so. I just, I think the only issue is just the airport, and that's what we're working through. The reception, I mean, the response I've heard from our community has been positive and I don't know what the controversy would be.

BW: Well, let's talk about something coming up from the Lynchburg Regional Airport. You are the chairman of Freedom Aviation, and you've been looking to buy out Virginia Aviation. This did not get a good reaction at first. You all have now offered to sweeten the deal, paying more rent and things like that, but also with you all buying Virginia Aviation according to sources at the News and Advance that terminates the lease, and so would the lease automatically go over to you regardless of what the city or people running the airport might want?

JF: No, no, no. Dave Young, the general who became the dean of the school of aviation several years ago, his goal has always been to create a sort of a laboratory at the airport for students to learn about airport management. They call it the aeronautics school now, it's grown so much that they can't really grow anymore at the Lynchburg airport. I forget the numbers, but they can't grow much more at all at the Lynchburg Airport because you can only have so many takeoffs and landings every day. So what he has done is establish satellite sites at different airports, one at Newport News, I think—Leesburg, Strasburg—and the goal is to have maybe a dozen more of those. And what he's doing is, these students are studying online for most of their courses. They are staying home, actually. These are older students and they do their flight training at the local airport. But the goal is to have those students spend one semester in Lynchburg and work as an intern in residency at an operating general aviation business, charter business, aircraft maintenance business, and buying Virginia Aviation gives him the ability to create that working laboratory for those students at the airport. At the airport commission, what we hear from that group was that several of them said that they could support it, but they needed to see something in it for the city. They said this is a good deal for Virginia Aviation, it's a good deal for Freedom Aviation, but there's nothing in it for the city. Several of them made that comment, so we went back between that hearing and the city counsel hearing and said, "Ok, what can we do to make this a good deal for the city of Lynchburg?" And the feedback we got from the city is that the concern was mainly that the general aviation function be protected and not encumbered or not overrun by the flight school operation. So that was the main goal of those proffers was to make general aviation priority, show them that our goal was to make it the best general aviation terminal that it could possibly be, and we agreed to invest in that. We agreed to keep flight school operations out of that. I talked to Mayor Gillette before the hearing the other night and I told him; I said that's our best shot at coming up with what the city wants to see from this arrangement. There might be other things that the city wants to see, so I suggested to him that they delay action and give us time to get input back from the city to see what the city is looking for, because we really do want to make that the best airport operation possible. And we didn't buy it like a businessman would have, to make a profit on it. What we're trying to do is make a laboratory for the School of Aeronautics. So we have the incentive to make it a lot better than the normal business owner would have, and we have an incentive to invest more capital in it. So I really think that the end result is going to be a first-class general aviation operation at the Lynchburg Airport.

BW: So what is the practical effect of the automatic termination of the lease upon the sale?

JF: Well, the way it works is, that's what the city was discussing the other night. We decided before the city council hearing, the seller of Virginia Aviation—we could keep asking him to wait on us to work this out with the city—we decided that even if the lease was terminated and the city decided to do something else with those particular buildings, that the benefit of owning the avionics and the field business, the other parts of Virginia Aviation, we could operate those functions in our existing buildings and it would still be a beneficial purchase for us. So we decided, I mean we couldn't do as many good things for the city and for the airport if we don't get a new lease on those other buildings, so that's why we're talking to the city now, making these offers, meeting with the city next week, coming up with something that really... we think it will be a whole lot better than anything they could ever obtain from any third-party aviation company that might be interested in operating in Lynchburg. And that's the case we're going to be making to the city on the lease of those building in the next week or two. But, either way, it still made sense for us to buy Virginia Aviation to create that laboratory I mentioned for our students—the residency experience. So we decided it was the best thing to do for Liberty. It will be an even better situation for the city and for Liberty if we can get this lease worked out going forward.

MW: Jerry Falwell Jr., thank you so much. We'll talk to you soon.

JF: Yeah, thank you Mari. See you, Brian.