Del Norte Triplicate

NEWS

Supervisors Seek Scapegoat in Airport Operations Failures

September 9, 2025



DEL NORTE COUNTY AIRPORT
AT JACK MCNAMARA FIELD • CRESCENT CITY, CA

The Board of Supervisors meandered into muddy waters en route to funding three Airport improvement projects mandated for completion. The Auditor/ Controller rushed to remedy the confusion at last week's meeting.

The Border Coast Regional Airport Authority (BCRAA) Is a Joint Powers Authority (JPA) which operates the Del Norte Regional Airport. Its members include: two members from the Board of Supervisors, two members from the Crescent City Council, one member from the Brookings City Council, one member from the Curry County Board of Commissioners and one member at-large from the Del Norte County public, one member from the Elk Valley Rancheria and one member from the Tollowa di-Nee Tribe.

Here are the projects BCRAA is working on:

• Runway 18-36 project improvements between $7-8 million.

• The acquisition of the ARFF safety firetruck, $385,000 plus $100,000 in extra equipment.

• Critically needed and mandated fencing, exceeding $900,000 to keep elk and other animals off the Airport grounds circumnavigating Jack McNamara Field.

Solutions were as clear as mud.

Rather than admit ignorance, and led by Supervisor Chris Howard, the 3rd District supervisor and Border Coast Regional Airport Authority member's (BCRAA), fingers did get pointed looking for a scapegoat and Howard found his scapegoat: former Board Coast Regional Airport Authority Director Ryan Cooley, who earned successful employee evaluations each year over his many years tenure with Del Norte.

Auditor Clint Schaad bee lined from his office to Board Chambers and brought clarity to the struggling supervisors who could not seem to find the verbiage to draft a motion to provide short term funding to pay invoices due to strained cash flow.

In a very unprofessional manner, Howard was quick to remind the audience and fellow colleague Supervisors that Cooley was conditionally hired to assume a new airport operations position for Humboldt County. Howard again found his pointing finger advising colleagues Cooley had been dismissed from this new position a mere six weeks into his new position by a consensus of Humboldt County Supervisors who felt he "…was not a good fit," according to Humboldt CAO Elishia Hayes.

Also not reported was the annual $276,000 paid by the County to BCRAA, since 2007. This payment remained static for decades and not based at any time on the inflationary index. Though not mandated, Cooley made at least two $100,000 loan payments back to the County.

The Triplicate has contacted each Humboldt supervisor for what appears to look like a bait and switch, hire and fire, by Humboldt supervisors.

To date, no Humboldt supervisor has responded.

Though BCRAA County members Howard and Darrin Short discussed at length over several meetings since 2024, neither Howard nor Short shared their understanding of the precarious cash flow issue in paying these mandated invoices with other supervisors, including Valerie Starkey who exclaimed she was learning about the cash flow conundrum for the first time.

The evidence however backs up Cooley over Howard, Short and Starkey.

According to Ryan Cooley, the previous airport director failed to bring financial concerns to BCRAA or the BOS.

Claim 1:

Fact: The record shows that financial matters- including the fund balance history, loan obligations and runway rehabilitation contributions- were repeatedly placed before the BCRAA for approval and oversight

• July 3, 2024 the Board explicitly received an update on the BCRAA fund balance over the last five years.

• March 7, 2024 the Board approved advertisement and project documents for the Runway 18-36 rehabilitation and staff presented updates on financial obligations tied to the terminal loan.

• January 3, 2024 the Board approved transmitting the 2025-2029 ACIP to the FAA, a clear record of long-term capital and financing planning

These items were approved in open session by the JPA commissioners, including Howard himself, when present. At no point were these updates hidden from BCRAA members.

Claim 2.

“The Commission wasn’t aware of the runway rehabilitation funding need.

Fact: The Board took action formal multiple actions to designate and allocate funds for runway 18-36.

• June 6, 2024. BCRAA approved creation of dedicated fund balance lines for JPA contributions for the 18-36 project.

• July 3, 2024, the Board approved transferring $204,000 in JPA contributions into Runway 18-36 designated account

• August 1, 2024. The Board approved another contribution- $38,500 from Curry County for Runway 18-36.

• September 5, 2024. The Board approved the Engineering Services for 18-36, Phase III Bidding and Construction Services.

These disclosures were NOT minor. They were Resolutions and votes for financial transfers, grant applications and contracts, all on Public Agendas and voted on by the Commissioners.

Claim 3.

“The Board could have sought outside financing if it had been shopped properly.

Fact: BCRAA member / Supervisor Howard ignores that the commissioners themselves had shared oversight authority and that decisions on financing required Board direction and approvals which were never blocked by the Airport Director.

The most recent ACIP and grant applications were reviewed and approved by the BCRAA Board in February, March and August 2024, respectively.

In Howard’s roll as a county supervisor and BCRAA commissioner, it gave him direct access to this information. If he believed alternative financing was necessary, it was his responsibility to raise and pursue that as a commissioner. Howard failed to report this to fellow supervisors.

The failure to bring these discussions to the Board of Supervisors lies directly with Howard and Commissioner Darrin Short, not the Airport Director.

Claim 4.

“The Previous Director left no cash in the bank.”

Fact: Financial updates on the balance were explicitly reported to the BCRAA Board

• The July 3 Agenda specifically included, “Receive update on BCRAA fund balance over the past five years.

• These updates were part of regular financial reporting. Any concerns over dwindling balances should have been acted upon by commissioners at that time.

Additionally, comparing the current financial situation to Randy Hooper’s tenure is misleading.

1) Federal CARES Act funds artificially inflated balances during Randy Hooper’s tenure. Those emergency relief funds were no longer available under new FAA grant guidelines.

2) None of the grants applied for under the current administration- including the Runway 18-36 Rehabilitation (Pre-Design and Design phases, both requiring 5 percent match) and the AARF truck acquisition- required large scale local debt drawdown. Instead, the matching funds were budgeted transparently and approved in open session.

3) Under the Hooper -managed tenure, BCRAA drew down Terminal Loan debt proceeds directly into the budget. It was these BCRAA funds payments that were used to pay down terminal loan itself. This maneuver effectively meant that no revenues from the pledged sources outlined in the Terminal Loan agreement such as JPA contributions or State aviation fuel tax reallocations were used for repayment; instead the General BCRAA operating budget was tapped to service that debt, directly affecting BCRAA budget.

Furthermore, during Cooley’s first two years as director, he was directed by the BCRAA commission to make a full Loan payment (year one) and at least a partial payment (year two).

Claim five:

Account and Oversight;

Howard himself admits, “It’s also the issue of the commissioners, that they do not have oversight on this and I’m (Howard) going to take some fault for that, too.”

• That is the core truth. The Airport Director placed financial updates, ACIP approvals, grant requests, fund balance reports and vendor contracts to the BCRAA Board. Commissioner Howard was part of that approval process.

Culpability rests clearing with Howard and Short.

On yet another matter for the last several years, former Supervisor David Finigan sat as the chairman as the at-large member, the public member of BCRAA. By-laws clearly state the at-large member may not serve as chairperson.

The question must be asked what commissioner Finigan knew about finances and cash flow issues on mandated FAA guidelines. Finigan's silence is deafening on mismanagement of the Border Coast Regional Airport Authority.

Conclusion:

Supervisor Howard's statement is mischaracterization of the record.

• The Airport Director brought forward all major financial updates, ACIP approvals and vendor obligations to the BCRAA Board.

• The Commissioners including Howard had direct oversight and votin authority.

• If there matters were not reported to the supervisors, that failure rests with Supervisors Howard and Short, not the Airport Director.

The evidence showed this was showed this was shared oversight, transparently managed and documented in public session- not a "massive oversight" by one individual.