

Los Altos Town Crier

Community news for Los Altos, Los Altos Hills and Mountain View since 1947

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Residents make noise with FAA over flight paths

By Bruce Barton
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Los Altos resident Donald Gardner awoke at 5:55 a.m. July 1 to the roaring sound of a cargo plane – one of at least half a dozen, by his count, that are flying between midnight and 6 a.m. despite a Federal Aviation Administration ban.

The overnight planes are just one aspect of the overarching airplane noise problem plaguing residents day and night from South San Francisco to Los Altos down to Capitola. An FAA

change in flight patterns last year, part of its NextGen plan to increase safety and route efficiency, resulted in planes taking direct paths over populated areas and flying at lower altitudes. An increased concentration of planes has resulted in local flyovers that residents like Gardner are experiencing every two to three minutes during the day.

The airplane noise has prompted residents to make noise, and the FAA is listening. An overflow crowd of approximately 750 residents attended a June 29 hearing



MARIT BARTON/SPECIAL TO THE TOWN CRIER
An FAA meeting on jet noise drew crowds in MV.

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on the matter at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts. It was the third and final public input meeting held in the past month with FAA and local officials.

The 12-member Select Committee on South Bay Arrivals, formed by U.S. Reps. Anna Eschroo, Sam Farr and Jackie Speier, heard testimony from FAA regional administrator Glen Martin as well as representatives of four anti-noise groups and more than 100 individual speakers.

The committee, led by Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian, comprises councilmembers and county supervisors from each of the affected areas.

"Many of the solutions are fairly straightforward," Simitian said after the June 29 meeting.

His committee is charged with reviewing the FAA's and residents' proposed solutions and making recommendations to the U.S. Congress.

"Having badly misstepped once (with NextGen), the FAA doesn't want to misstep again," Simitian said. "Before it goes forward, the FAA wants community support."

The next step involves committee members taking the recent

public and FAA input and then making recommendations. The committee has scheduled two meetings – Friday and July 22 – to do just that. Simitian said he hopes to have the recommendations by early fall.

Los Altos Hills Councilman Gary Waldeck is one of the principal committee members, while Los Altos Councilman Jean Morado is among the 12-member alternate group.

Challenges ahead

The committee's challenge will be reaching consensus on the best solutions, which at this point vary significantly. Two anti-noise groups, Quiet Skies NorCal and Quiet Skies MidPen, both assert that the other's proposed solutions would transfer the noise problem to other communities.

NorCal's Ben Shelef recommended the "simple solution" – one he claims is endorsed by the FAA – of reverting to the flight path prior to the NextGen change in March 2015. Planes previously flew what is referred to as the BIGSUR route, west of the current SERFR flight path.

Shelef reasoned that the previous route did not generate nearly the number of complaints, so why not "move it back to where it was?"

But Gardner, allied with the Los Altos-represented Quiet Skies MidPen, said the NorCal proposal would improve Shelef's Saratoga area but make matters worse for others, because it addresses neither lower altitudes nor concentration of planes.

Gardner said statistics show that gradual changes played a role in the impacts felt today, not just "flipping the switch" on routes in 2015. He noted increases in numbers and concentrations of airplanes, and lowered altitudes, that can be traced back to 2010.

Statistics collected from SFO reveal a 65 percent increase in concentrated flight arrivals over the "Menlo Waypoint" – flights over Los Altos and Palo Alto – from 1,705 planes in September 2010 to 2,630 in September 2015. Average altitude has dropped 665 feet from 4,978 in September 2010 to 4,313 in April 2016.

Total SFO arrivals rose from 3,885 in September 2010 to 5,646 in April 2016. The number of complaints to SFO averaged approximately 49 per month in 2013, a figure that increased to 1,913 during April 2016.

Seeking solutions

In response to the public outcry, FAA officials made a "feas-

ibility list" of proposed solutions. That list doesn't sit well with some activists, who claim viable ones aren't included while others are wrongly deemed "infeasible."

Los Altos resident Tami Mulcahy, who testified at the June 29 meeting, said the FAA must adopt noise metrics that "reflect the true impact of noise on the ground." The FAA's NextGen analysis deemed the noise "not significant."

"There should be limits on traffic capacity and noise, just like there are capacity and pollution limits in other industries," she said. "Just because limits don't exist in the aviation industry doesn't make it right to take advantage of the gaping need for regulation."

Mulcahy added that solutions "must not make winners and losers."

"There should be no such monster as a sacrificial noise corridor," she said to loud applause from the audience.

Solving the problem for everyone, Gardner indicated, would involve moving flights from the north back over the San Francisco Bay, rerouting night flights, raising the altitudes of the planes and decreasing concentration by adding more routes.

Gardner, an electrical engineer, also proposed requiring in-



BRUCE BARTON/TOWN CRIBER

Residents told the FAA that flight noise polluted their domestic landscape.

stallation of vortex generators on U.S. airliners to mitigate the irritating, high-pitched sound plaguing some older planes. He said the costs would be minimal, and some European airlines, such as Germany's Lufthansa, have already installed them.

"We've made huge progress over the last four to six weeks," Gardner said. "(The FAA) is being cooperative at this point. They're at the table and they're really looking at this."

July 18, 2016

Fighting airliner noise

BY ELAINE GOODMAN
 Daily Post Correspondent

A panel of 12 elected officials from San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties has begun working on solutions to a recent increase in aircraft noise on the Peninsula from planes heading into San Francisco International Airport.



SIMITIAN The Select Committee on South Bay Arrivals, chaired by Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian, held its first “working meet-

Simitian-led panel looks for solutions

ing” on Friday at Palo Alto City Hall. The group plans to meet twice a month through October and finalize a package of recommendations regarding aircraft noise by mid-November. The recommendations will be sent to the three members of Congress who formed the Select Committee: Reps. Anna Eshoo, Jackie Speier and Sam Farr.

Meanwhile, the Menlo Park City

Council is scheduled to weigh in regarding the issue of aircraft noise during its meeting tomorrow.

The council will consider a resolution that would ask the FAA to take steps to reduce aircraft noise that’s been bothering Menlo Park residents, such as routing more flights heading to SFO over the Bay, rather than over homes, spreading out incoming flights over a wider area and keeping planes at a higher altitude for a longer time as they make their descent.

The increase in aircraft noise began
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last year, as the FAA started implementing its Next Generation Air Transportation System, or NextGen. The program involves a switch from ground-based radar systems to satellite-based navigation and aircraft tracking. Over the last year, the FAA has been shifting to its newly designed flight paths, and in the process, has subjected Menlo Park and Peninsula area residents to increased aircraft noise, Clay Curtin, assistant to the city manager, said in a report to the Menlo Park council.

The multibillion dollar NextGen program is intended to use airspace more efficiently and make the skies safer, Curtin said. It's scheduled for full roll out by 2025.

In April, the three members of Congress announced formation of the Select Committee, which consists of council members and county supervisors from the three counties. The group started by holding

three community hearings. About 750 people showed up to the Santa Clara County meeting, 500 in Santa Cruz County and 150 in San Mateo County, according to Simitian.

Anti-noise groups are heard

The panel heard presentations from a dozen community groups focused on aircraft noise, including Sky Posse Palo Alto and Quiet Skies Mid-Peninsula. Each group has its own ideas on how to reduce aircraft noise.

Friday's meeting of the Select Committee was an organizational session. The panel decided to aim for a super-majority consensus on its recommendations, with approval from at least one representative from each county.

Still unclear is how detailed the committee will get in its recommendations. An FAA representative said that if the panel made a recommendation to retrofit aircraft to reduce noise, for example, it would be best to not recommend specific equipment. That way, if that particular equipment is no longer available, the recommendation wouldn't become irrelevant, he said.

Asking the FAA to change a flight path, including a particular altitude and angle of descent, would also be overly specific, the representative said.

The FAA representative cautioned the panel that several steps would remain before any of its recommendations could become reality. The members of Congress would need to agree with the recommendations, and there also might be issues regarding unions or environmental regulations, he said.

Simitian said the committee also would try to identify issues that would need longer-term attention - in particular, the question of how the FAA measures aircraft noise.

Complaints are rising

Airplane noise complaints for SFO flights are up more than 10-fold since the flight paths were revised last year, reaching the highest numbers since the SFO Noise Abatement Office was created in 1975.

"The resulting aircraft noise has dramatically impacted several neighborhoods under the new flight path," Farr, the Congressman, wrote on his website. "Previously tranquil home life has been interrupted day and night by jet noise. My office has heard from many people about noise that can shake windows, wake children, and drown out everyday conversation."

Farr, who said he has experienced this noise first hand, called the situation unacceptable.

He also criticized the FAA's process for introducing the new flight paths. Despite spending several years on a review of all flight routes for the San Francisco, San Jose, and Oakland airports, the FAA never reached out to the community to inform them of potential impacts or ask for feedback, Farr said.

San Jose Mercy News

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Palo Alto

New flight paths still up in the air

Committee on plane noise to consider draft recommendations at hearing

By Eric Kurhi

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PALO ALTO — An airplane noise committee will hear draft recommendations Thursday that could offer relief to South Bay, Peninsula and Santa Cruz residents furious over jet roar from new flight paths the fed-

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eral government imposed in recent years to improve efficiency.

But it remains uncertain whether residents will get the relief they want — people living in different areas want different solutions, and there's no recommendation on a key question of switching a route for southern arrivals. No decision is expected at Thursday's meeting at Palo Alto City Hall. After Thursday's public comment hearing, the committee will meet to discuss the recommendations Nov. 3 before a decision is due at a final meeting on Nov. 17.

The draft report was released last week by Santa Clara County Supervisor Joe Simitian's office as a summary of what has been discussed since May by the Select Committee on South Bay Arrivals, a panel of elected officials from Santa Cruz, San Mateo and Santa Clara counties. The group was created by local members of Congress and charged with coming up with recommendations for the Federal Aviation Administration after airplane noise complaints skyrocket-



RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF

Tom Rindfleisch, senior research scientist emeritus in medicine and computer science at the Stanford University School of Medicine, looks up at an aircraft flying over as a sound-level meter registers its noise in decibels from his backyard in Palo Alto.

etted following flight path changes that started around March 2015.

Since then, affected residents have banded into community groups bearing names such as Quiet Skies NorCal and Sky Posse Palo Alto to make their collective voices known. Some ideas have been received with general agreement while others have turned residents of neighboring areas path moved back to where

it won't be the same if it's moved back and want a solution that spreads out the now-concentrated traffic.

That's the sticking point between the air noise groups and an area that Simitian said there was no committee consensus on. The items that are recommended in the report aren't nearly as contentious. That includes suggestions to have planes begin their descent into San Francisco International Airport from a higher altitude and changing airspace designations to better allow for what's called an optimized descent — gliding in with as little engine power as possible.

"The report can be summarized like this," Simitian said. "Fly over places with fewer people, not more. Fly at higher altitudes, and don't engage in flight maneuvers that are noisy." The flight paths were altered as a result of the FAA's new NextGen system, which is being rolled out around the country. It concentrates flights on very focused routes, allowing greater control in guiding airplanes into designated

"Metrolplex" areas, saving fuel, curbing emissions, and increasing the punctuality of arrivals and departures. But as a result, those living under the new focused paths saw a tremendous increase in air traffic.

Jon Zweig, who lives under the old path, said the only equitable solution is to share the misery.

"While it is understandable that elected officials would want to protect their constituents by simply moving the noise pollution somewhere else, this is very shortsighted thinking," he said. "The only durable solution is one in which everyone who benefits from the airport takes a fair share of the noise."

Simitian said while "there are some who think this is an easy call one way or the other, it is one of the more challenging issues."

"We do want to avoid this becoming a case of winners and losers," he said, "but that being said the planes are going to go over one path or another."

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