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Mather test noise issue is up in air

A change in the flight patterns doesn't solve residents' problem.

By Maija-Liisa Young and Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writers - (*Published October 19, 2003*)

Midway through a 120-day flight test for night landings at Mather Airport, residents in Sacramento and El Dorado counties are pitted against each other over the issue of noise.

The issue has become so contentious that the El Dorado County-City of Folsom Joint Powers Authority - - made up of representatives from the Folsom City Council and the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors -- voted Wednesday to send a letter to the Federal Aviation Administration asking the agency to end the test immediately.

Panel members argued that the test -- which shifts more air traffic over the communities of El Dorado Hills, Cameron Park and Shingle Springs -- has proved divisive and has continued long enough to conclude that the change in flight path has not solved the noise problem.

Many, but not all, residents attending recent meetings about the flight test noise would readily agree.

Residents from Cameron Park, Shingle Springs and several from El Dorado Hills complained that they have suffered sleepless nights recently as large cargo jets fly over their homes. But Folsom and some El Dorado Hills residents said the alternative flight path alleviates their noise problems and, more importantly, sheds light on the regional nature of noise from the airport.

"This is a problem for the entire eastern region," Folsom Councilman Andy Morin said. "This test shows we aren't crazy here in Folsom."

The residents' comments came during three workshops held this month by Sacramento County and the FAA. Approximately 245 residents attended the meetings, and their comments will be sent to the FAA, which will make the ultimate decision on the flight path.

The FAA began the test July 15 in response to complaints about noise from planes landing at Mather and was to continue it for 120 days.

Between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m., pilots are asked to fly an alternative path that decreases air traffic over Folsom and shifts it farther south over El Dorado Hills and neighboring communities.

The approach, which was used by some pilots before the test began, remains north of Highway 50 to the Sacramento-El Dorado county line.

But the pilots can revert to using the main eastern arrival path, which sends their planes over Folsom, for a number of reasons, including safety, Steve Alverson, Sacramento County's noise consultant, said at the workshops.

Sacramento County is compiling the number of flights that use the alternative path versus the planes that fly the main route. The information will be passed on to the FAA.

The flight path test has been steeped in controversy since it began. In August, El Dorado County Supervisor Rusty Dupray asked Sacramento County to terminate the test immediately.

Many El Dorado County residents said the test is the first step in moving the flight path permanently away from Folsom and over other communities.

"A casual reading of the map shows this test is a transparent move of the path," said Mark Willstatter of Cameron Park, adding that since the test began, he has not been able to sleep well because the planes flying overhead cause windows to rattle.

Corey Lockett of Folsom admitted that the new flight path that has disturbed others allows his family to sleep soundly.

"The approach is helping our house to the detriment of thousands of people," he said. "My dad lives in Serrano. He was at (the meeting in El Dorado Hills) complaining about the noise."

At Folsom's workshop, Folsom Mayor Steve Miklos said the city is not interested in moving the noise from one community to another.

"Ultimately, we want to chair a collective effort" and find a regional solution, he said.

Several residents suggested closing Mather Airport or limiting the types of aircraft there.

The only way to "get rid of the noise is to move the air cargo back to International (airport)," said Bill Bryant of Folsom.

"The noise wasn't here when the Air Force left."

And when Mather was an Air Force base, the sound of the B52s flying over her El Dorado Hills home could be more easily tolerated, Kathleen Sorensen said.

"That was the sound of freedom," she said about the bombers that flew overhead. "That's the price we paid. This (the air cargo noise) is the sound of money. And it's somebody else's money."

Tara McCann of El Dorado Hills, who said she has battled airport noise for eight years, suggested that legal action is the only answer.

"We need a lawsuit," she said. "What we need to say is, 'Sacramento County, you need to take care of your noise.' "

El Dorado County Supervisor Helen Baumann pleaded with residents to work together to solve the noise problem.

"Fighting and arguing is not going to do the job," she said. "I hope the power of your emotions can be put into the power of actions."

The test is scheduled to conclude in mid-November, but the letter from the joint powers authority could prompt the FAA to end it sooner, airport noise manager Monica Newhouse said after the meeting of the El Dorado County-Folsom panel.

Sacramento County and the FAA will hold two more meetings, one at the end of the test and a final meeting after the FAA analyzes the results of the flight path test.

The El Dorado County Board of Supervisors also adopted a resolution Tuesday asking that the Sacramento County Airport System and the county Board of Supervisors act immediately to eliminate obtrusive aircraft noise in El Dorado County neighborhoods.

The El Dorado County supervisors have asked that the airport's impact on their county be considered as

Sacramento County officials develop the master plan for the airport and consider expansion of air cargo services at Mather.

About the Writer

The Bee's Cathy Locke can be reached at (916) 608-7451 or clocke@sacbee.com.

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