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Residents speak out about airport noise

Meetings to address Mather's cargo jet traffic and its future.

By David Richie - Bee Staff Writer

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Residents in Folsom, El Dorado Hills and other communities surrounding Mather Airport complain that cargo jets already jar them out of their sleep and rattle them again in the afternoon and evening.

Alarmed by the potential for an increase in cargo flights, some are preparing critical comments on environmental impacts associated with Mather's master plan, which envisions the airport growing into a major cargo hub.

Sacramento County environmental officials will be gathering those comments during meetings Tuesday in Rancho Cordova and Thursday in Folsom.

"Our morning started today at 4:13," said Folsom resident Charles Coalson, who has taken an activist role on the noise issue for years.

That is typical, Coalson said. On some days, several flights go over his house between 3 and 6 a.m., with additional flights between 4 and 9 p.m.

"It disrupts our lives," he said.

Neighborhoods in Folsom, El Dorado Hills, Orangevale and Fair Oaks are on the approach to Mather's main runway. Residents in all those communities see cargo jets clearing the foothills from the east or circling in from another direction to get on the approach line.

A Folsom resident since 1968, Coalson said cargo operations differ greatly from the activity that occurred when Mather was an Air Force base.

"The military directed traffic away from populated areas," Coalson said. "Cargo carriers also have changed the time period when flights are occurring."

Airport officials regularly work with activists like Coalson, said Glen Rickelton, a planner and noise abatement officer for the Sacramento County Airport System. "We are familiar with them, and we take them very seriously," he said.

The meetings next week are being conducted by the Sacramento County Department of Environmental Review and Assessment to make sure the proposed master plan conforms with federal and state guidelines.

"We want people to come to these meetings and voice their concerns," Rickelton said.

About 264 cargo flights arrive at Mather each week. The big cargo jets that generate the most noise complaints account for about 120 flights. The rest are "cargo feeder aircraft" of various sizes, he said.

Rickelton acknowledged that the draft Mather master plan contemplates an increase in cargo activity but said it is difficult to project how significant that increase may be.

"Our current numbers are not keeping pace with what was forecast," he said.

The draft master plan, written several years ago, contains three levels of forecasts of air carrier operations -- flights in and out -- in sets termed base, low and high. The highest forecast indicated annual air carrier operations of 9,949 in 2005, rising to 20,514 by 2020.

Determining what level of growth to expect is a major frustration for residents, who feel there already are too many noisy flights. They complain that airport officials are not forthcoming about their projections, and they see real problems if Mather becomes a major cargo hub serving the entire Pacific Rim.

"I personally think that this is the wrong application for Mather Airport," said Coalson.

Rickelton said the environmental review process also will fine-tune growth projections.

Concern about future growth should bolster attendance at the environmental impact meetings, said Gail Furness de Pardo, Folsom's interim assistant community development director. She works with Coalson and other activists.

"The center of the Mather flight line goes through the city of Folsom," Furness de Pardo said. The problem is especially noticeable on the south side of the city, including the Broadstone and Empire Ranch areas, she said.

Potential transformation of Mather Airport into a major regional cargo hub is a "significant concern" for the city of Folsom and the surrounding communities, Furness de Pardo said.

Orangevale resident Jonathan Ganz said the big cargo jets are especially noticeable when they lumber in low and loud over Lake Natoma while he is trying to teach a sailing class

"I have to stop talking. We all sit on the dock and watch the plane, wondering if it is going to land in the lake," Ganz said.

Shingle Springs resident John Kerhlikar said he's been battling the noise problem since 1997.

"Our houses are at 1,500 to 2,000 feet and those planes are at 3,000 feet. Do the math," he said.

The county is trying to deal with residents' concerns while planning for the future.

"The airport system has been given a mandate by the Board of Supervisors to operate Mather as an air cargo airport," Rickelton said.

Airport officials do not have much leeway when it comes to limiting traffic. They need to be able to develop airport improvements to handle a high number of cargo flights when and if those flights start coming in, he said.

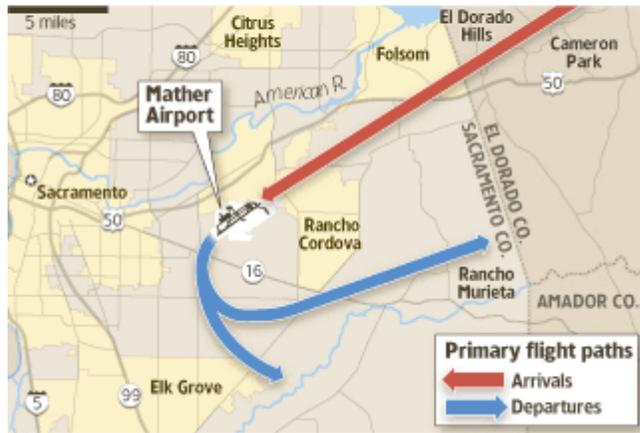
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Flight noise

Some residents who live along Mather Airport's main flight paths, particularly those on the approach, say large cargo jets make too much noise. Anticipating even more flights in the future, county officials are inviting public comment at hearings next week.



Source: Sacramento County Airport System

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