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Airlines over more of O.C.? 'Completely unacceptable,' county and Newport tell FAA

Residents have expressed anxiety about the agency's proposal to let planes approach and depart over multiple communities.

By Hannah Fry

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Newport Beach residents who have expressed unease about the increased noise that could result from the Federal Aviation Administration's proposal to alter flight paths from John Wayne Airport have been heard.

The Orange County Board of Supervisors and Newport Beach city officials sent letters to the FAA this week outlining the concerns.

The possible change to flight paths is part of the FAA's efforts to replace traditional, ground-based air traffic procedures with satellite-based technology at 11 Southern California airports, including John Wayne.

The changes are part of the Next Generation Air Transportation System, which the FAA believes has the potential to save fuel, reduce emissions and delays, and shorten flight times.

The agency hopes to improve airport access in congested air traffic areas and establish flight plans that are less dispersed than they have been historically.

"The FAA's goal is to improve the way aircraft navigate these complex areas to make flight routes and airport access more efficient," according to agency documents.

However, maps attached to the FAA's draft environmental assessment show broad swaths of the county where aircraft could approach and depart from JWA. This could result in planes flying over areas of Newport Beach that have not previously had to deal with many overhead flights, including Big Canyon, Corona del Mar and Newport Coast.

The maps also suggest that aircraft could operate as far north as Laguna Woods and as far south as Dana Point and approach the airport in a way that would affect communities from Yorba Linda through Irvine.

"While the nominal tracks for approaches and departures proposed in the Draft EA are anticipated to fall near or in the middle of these swaths, it would be completely unacceptable for aircraft to operate on a regular basis in the outer reaches of the areas shown on the diagrams," Supervisor Todd Spitzer wrote in the county's letter.

Newport Beach Mayor Ed Selich said the city echoed similar sentiments in its own letter to the agency,

noting that the environmental assessment regarding flight paths is difficult to comprehend.

"It's hard to tell where they're actually going," he said. "We want them to follow the historical departure pattern that they've been using that runs down the bay without going over new territory."

The FAA's noise studies associated with the project found no "significant or reportable noise impacts," according to the environmental report.

Decades ago, John Wayne Airport, Newport Beach, the county and two community groups entered into an agreement that established a curfew, annual passenger limit, number of departures and noise limits at the airport. The noise-abatement agreement stemmed in part from residents' complaints. In 2014, the parties extended the agreement through December 2030.

As part of the agreement, the county established seven sound monitors along the airport's departure corridor. Some aircraft carriers use noise-abatement procedures during departures, such as ascending rapidly and "throttling back" the engine when flying over homes.

The county is requesting that the FAA revise its report to clarify that the agency's project will not require changes to the noise-abatement procedures or jeopardize efforts to get carriers to comply with the noise limits, according to the supervisors' letter.

This isn't the first time that the FAA has proposed changes to flight paths at John Wayne Airport.

In 2009, the FAA implemented its DUKE ONE departure pattern, which angered residents in Irvine Terrace and on the eastside of Upper Newport Bay. Neighbors said more flights flew over their homes as a result. After a few adjustments, the FAA renamed the pattern STREL and moved flights farther west, away from the Bluffs community.

Selich said the city's goal is to work with the FAA to reduce effects on residents. Still, the city has limited control over how the FAA chooses its flight paths, he said.

"We can control planes on the ground with the settlement agreement," he said. "Once the wheels leave the ground, we don't have any regulatory control. That's why it's important that we try to the best of our ability to influence what the FAA is doing now in the process."

The FAA's public comment period on the project environmental assessment will end on Sept. 8.