

Flying Cloud

It must take more of the load

Even before last Tuesday, small noncommercial jet aircraft was one of the fastest-growing segments of American air traffic. It's a good bet that trend is about to accelerate. Safety worries and longer delays associated with commercial air travel could well make private jets even more the flight mode of choice for those who can afford them.

It is with that likelihood looming that a public hearing will take place at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Hennepin Technical College auditorium in Eden Prairie. Its topic: a proposal by the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) to extend the longest runway at Flying Cloud Airport and to repeal a 23-year-old commission rule, Ordinance 51, that allows only the smallest jets to use Flying Cloud.

A crowd of unhappy airport neighbors and Eden Prairie officials is expected to turn out in opposition to the MAC proposal. Who can blame them? No homeowner would welcome a larger, busier airport to the neighborhood. Enlarging Flying Cloud in the face of Ordinance 51's implicit assurance to the contrary must feel like betrayal to people who bought or built homes in the region since 1978.

The airports commission owes Eden Prairie residents a full and respectful hearing. It owes them a detailed explanation of the reasons for its proposal, and a renewed commitment to working with city officials and with the Federal Aviation Administration to mitigate the ill effects of an enlarged Flying Cloud on its neighbors.

But the commission's first duty is meeting the aviation needs of the entire metropolitan area. Those needs plainly compel greater use of Flying Cloud and the other smaller airports in the region — including those as far away as Rochester and St. Cloud. Indeed, a 1996 state law aimed at maximizing utilization of existing airport facilities requires as much.

Eden Prairie's concern about noise and disruption, however justified, cannot be allowed to block expansion indefinitely at Flying Cloud. The airports commission's plan to move all noncommercial jet operations away from Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport took on new urgency with the events of last week. Accommodating the expected larger volume of small jets at the big airport would make for longer delays and less safety for commercial air travelers.

More room for corporate and private jets must be found at the area's reliever airports. With St. Paul's Holman Field already near maximum capacity and tiny Crystal Airport locked in by development, Flying Cloud and the Anoka County/Blaine Airport have to prepare to carry more of the load.

Eden Prairie residents may argue that last week's events toss so much uncertainty into all aviation questions that delay at Flying Cloud is warranted. But what is instead warranted is a freeing of MAC's hand to respond as needed to changing conditions. Ordinance 51 is so inflexible that it may disqualify MAC for future FAA capital improvement grants. It cannot stand.

Vicki Pellar-Price: Flying Cloud already carrying huge load

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Vicki Pellar-Price

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Flying Cloud Airport "must take more of the load" ([editorial, Sept. 18](#))? Doesn't the Star Tribune check its archives for facts, or do editorial writers just make them up along the way? In October 2000, your own aviation beat reporter purveyed numbers from 1999 operations, reporting that Flying Cloud carries the biggest load, 192,737, compared with all the relievers.

St. Paul's Holman Field trailed with 158,835 in 1999, indicating it's far behind Flying Cloud in diverting small jets from Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP). Though Holman has the runway length to accommodate even larger jets, annual flooding sends many lessees to Flying Cloud every spring. Holman's proximity to MSP and the cities, along with its infrastructure and services, should make it the facility of choice, yet the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) leaves Holman floating on its back with 75 percent of the property submerged every year.

Relaying safety worries as only associated with commercial operations which would "make private jets even more the flight mode of choice" is more Star Tribune fiction. Smaller airports pose more of a security risk. The reopening of major U.S. airports under antiterrorism measures belies a failure to do the same for smaller airstrips that have no security procedures.

What about the risks in smaller planes themselves, many of which allow passengers to sit right behind or next to the pilot and the controls? If proposed regulatory changes take effect in 2002, commercial fractionals, planes for hire, would get noncommercial status and be allowed to operate out of communities with small general aviation airports and zip security.

MAC's plan to move all noncommercial jets away from MSP is discriminatory and flies in the face of aviation rules. Ask U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar of the House Transportation Committee. MAC says that it can't dictate where planes go -- no airport getting grant funding can turn away small planes -- but it sure looks as if MAC's trying.

The Star Tribune says Ordinance 51 can't stand. In answer to a lawsuit with Eden Prairie, MAC created Ordinance 51 and locked its step to the tune of a 20,000-pound weight limitation back in 1978. MAC also signed on to an agreement which prohibits future expansion. If MAC now finds itself in a hand-lock -- which disqualifies the commission from future capital improvement grants -- it's self-induced.

Despite the knowledge that there are serious breaches in aviation security and accountability that could also be suffered by reliever communities, MAC proceeds with expansion plans. What can't stand is the disposition of residents and communities in favor of aviation interests.

— Vicki Pellar-Price, Eden Prairie. Spokeswoman for Zero Expansion.

Return to top

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