

Residents vent to FAA about noisy flight paths

BY WAYNE SCHUTSKY
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“All of a sudden, I noticed planes every 90 seconds,” said Scottsdale resident Bud Kern. “It was a big change from no noise to a lot of noise.”

Kern, who lives in the DC Ranch community in northern Scottsdale, is not alone. Soon after the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) made changes to arrival and departure flight paths in 2014, residents around the Valley began complaining that the new routes increased flight noise over their communities.

He and other Scottsdale residents attending an FAA workshop last week to offer their comments on what the agency should do about flight paths into and out of Phoenix Sky Harbor Airport.

“Most residents bought out here for the quiet of the desert and the Scottsdale lifestyle,” Kern said. “We enjoyed that for years and then things changed.”

The changes – made under the FAA’s 2014 NextGen plan aimed at increasing efficiency – resulted in a successful legal challenge by the City of Phoenix and some of its historic neighborhoods, which argued the FAA did not do proper public outreach to figure out how the path changes would affect them.

The first step of a plan agreed to by Phoenix and the FAA caused the agency to return westbound departure routes to “approximate, as closely as possible, the pre-September 2014 flight paths,” according to the FAA.

The only problem for Kern, and other residents in northern Scottsdale, is his property is more affected by eastbound departures.

Kern, one of the first residents to reach out to the city about the issue following the 2014 implementation, eventually organized the Scottsdale Coalition for



People attended the Federal Aviation Administration’s workshops last week to give their input on flight paths over Scottsdale and the rest of the Valley, some complaining that ever since the routes were changed in 2014, things have gotten noisy. (Pablo Robles/Progress Staff Photographer)

Airplane Noise Abatement, or SCANA. The citizen’s group has fought for years to convince the FAA to re-adopt the pre-NextGen routes.

FAA maps at the workshop showed that most comments the agency has received from Scottsdale residents are coming from areas in northeast part of the city that are affected by three east departure routes.

Some comments also came from the Airport areas, where an arrival route from the east crosses over the McDowell Preserve and then over homes and businesses in Airport area.

The FAA has now made headway in addressing concerns over those routes.

Step two of the FAA’s plan includes considering comments about other routes affected by the changes in 2014, FAA spokesman Ian Gregor said.

“Frankly, we are just here to listen,” Gregor said.

For Kern and fellow SCANA member John Nolan just having the FAA show up for that conversation counts for something.

“It appears we finally got their attention,” Nolan said.

After five years of fighting to have their voices heard, Scottsdale residents are cautiously optimistic about the FAA’s latest efforts, which included holding the three community workshops in April.

The FAA is also accepting public comment on its website through May 23 at faa.gov/nextgen/nextgen_near_you/community_involvement/phx.

The workshops included illustrations that showed arrival and departure routes for Phoenix Sky Harbor and other area airports today and what routes looked

like in 2013, before the FAA implemented NextGen.

They also showed two conceptual route changes that would split existing east departure and arrival routes into two routes. That conceptual change would not eliminate plane traffic over areas affected by the 2014 changes, but would likely decrease the concentration of travel over specific areas.

“I’m excited that the FAA came to these meetings with concepts to provide relief,” Kern said. “These concepts have a lot of promise.”

Though the potential new routes do not quite accomplish the goal of reinstating pre-2014 routes, Kern said they are a good start and he is happy the FAA is now speaking with residents about their concerns.

“This is a good place to start and I am glad the door is open a crack... (but) this issue is not 100 percent solved,” Kern said.

Fellow SCANA member Nolan shared similar thoughts.

“These concepts are certainly a step in the right the direction,” Nolan said. “Our starting point has always been going back to the old routes. This doesn’t do that, but it is a step in the right direction, and I would like to see it expanded.”

Still, Nolan is cautious with his optimism – and rightfully so.

The FAA is quick to point out that the conceptual changes to east routes are in the earliest stages and have not gone through any of the necessary environ-

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mental or operational feasibility studies required to implement them.

“These are drawings on the back of a napkin,” said Gregor.

Though he could not comment on these particular conceptual routes, Gregor said it generally takes 18 to 24 months for routes to go through the needed feasibility studies.

For the City of Scottsdale, just getting to this point is a small victory in a longer battle to address the community’s concerns – as evidenced by the presence of several public officials, including Mayor Jim Lane, at the FAA’s meeting at Pinnacle High School in Phoenix, the event nearest to Scottsdale.

Lane has sent numerous letters to the FAA, his counterparts in Phoenix and Arizona’s Congressional delegation since 2014 in search of a solution.

He credits the Congressional delegation for taking those concerns seriously. The late Senator John McCain and former Senator Jeff Flake included a provision in the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2017 a requirement that the FAA take steps to mitigate the negative effects they have on the community that a municipality

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can prove.

“We have had tremendous support from our Congressional delegation,” Lane said.

Lane said he was supportive of the FAA’s April meetings, because it was what the agency should have done all along.

“What is being demonstrated here today is the FAA is doing more than it originally included when considering the impact on our community,” Lane said.

Despite his stance, Lane said the city did not pursue litigation against the FAA a la Phoenix because it “didn’t feel it was necessary at the time.”

Still, Lane does credit the Phoenix

court victory for setting the stage for events like the public outreach meetings in April.

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In February 2018, the City of Scottsdale engaged Covington & Burling, LLC, an international lobbying firm, to represent the city on issues related to the 2014 flight path changes.

In July 2018, the City Council approved a contract worth up to \$40,000 with the firm. The Council later approved in November 2018 extending that contract for a year through December 2019.

Covington & Burling was responsible for a number of duties under the contract, including performing “a high-level assessment of three areas: options related to the current on-going regulatory proceeding; options under other legal authorities; and options based on political and legislative actions,” according to communications between the city and the firm.

On the advice of Covington & Burling, the city agreed to a contract with JDA Aviation Technology Solutions in November

2018 worth up to \$115,000 to provide expert recommendations regarding the flight paths through Scottsdale.

JDA will use Sky Harbor flight track data and analyze the FAA’s conceptual paths and also develop alternatives paths.

“We will be taking that information and work with the City of Scottsdale to formally comment in response to these concepts to see how we can build from there,” said Cynthia Schultz, JDA vice president.

The ongoing efforts by the city and comments from the FAA make it clear that there is still a long way to go before this issue crosses the finish line.

“The idea that they are proposing some conceptual shifts means there has been some consideration for our concerns,” Lane said. “I’m heartened but this is not a settled matter.”

SCANA and other Scottsdale residents have been encouraged by the recent progress and hope to build on it to find a solution that works for both sides.

“We understand what (the FAA) is trying to do (with the NextGen program),” Nolan said. “But there has got to be a middle ground.”

“Our objective on this is we want the skies back to where they were from a quality of life point of view.”