

# **FAA STILL IN A STALL; CITY SHOULD PASS THE FAST-JET BAN**

BY BRIAN BLAND, ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS, FRIENDS OF SUNSET PARK

The Federal Aviation Administration has landed on Santa Monica again, dropping a “fresh” proposal to reduce the potential disaster of a jet aircraft overrun at Santa Monica Airport (SMO). But it’s not “fresh.” It has a familiar odor, like jet exhaust and horse exhaust.

FAA honcho Kirk Shaffer will do a touch-and-go at the March 25 Santa Monica City Council meeting to push the proposal, the same site where he crashed and burned last August. Shaffer said then that if Santa Monica is so concerned about executive jets overrunning the runway, the city should buy the homes that sit mere yards away and tear ‘em down. That wouldn’t create the safety overrun areas SMO lacks, but at least the resulting fireball would not consume homes, just the fliers and some motorists. Shaffer seemed unmoved by the fact the houses were there long before the FAA side-stepped its own guidelines to allow jets to use SMO.

The home-destruction proposal left council members looking for airsick bags. They did hurl, but only angry words. Hundreds of residents were crammed into the chamber like unlucky gamblers on a Sunday night flight out of Vegas. Scores of others watched via TV in the City Hall lobby, jeering like tired travelers reacting to a “flight delayed” sign. In fact, delay was on their minds: the five-year-plus delay the FAA put them through before finally showing up to suggest tearing down their homes.

The other part of the FAA’s August 2007 proposal was for an aircraft arresting system called an EMAS to be installed at both ends of SMO’s runway. But the system’s manufacturer said that size EMAS would work only if the planes heavy enough to trigger the system were going 40 knots or less. Even then, he said, the effectiveness was far below foolproof. He said if those same aircraft were going 70 knots, they’d roll through that size EMAS and exit the other end still going fast enough to smash into a busy street and homes. Shaffer repeatedly called SMO a “reliever” airport for nearby LAX, in essence, another LAX runway.

Council members, at their most quotable, rejected the proposal. Fed up with the FAA’s delays, and knowing the number of jets at SMO will keep growing, the council had its staff draft a law to ban the two fastest kinds of jets. Those C and D aircraft pose the greatest danger of a disastrous overrun because of speed, relative size and the bomb-like effect they’d have on lumber and flesh. The city also believes the FAA is violating the 1984 agreement that governs operations at SMO through 2014. It indicates SMO is designed for generally slower, lighter, aircraft, the A and B classes. The FAA believes its authority allows it to override the agreement.

In November 2007, despite an FAA threat to sue, the council passed (7-0) the fast-jet ban on the first of its two required readings. Council members praised concerned residents for doing the research that refuted the FAA claim that jet aircraft overruns present little or no danger at Santa Monica-sized airports that have no safe overrun areas. The council said it believes the FAA is putting business interests ahead of safety by taking months to make proposals that are aimed only at keeping the fastest jets at SMO.

More time has gone by. The City Council, in no rush to face a long, expensive, lawsuit, now plans the second reading of the proposed fast-jet ban on March 25 after Shaffer’s presentation. Meantime, the FAA has been pressed by a California congressional delegation and the head of the House Transportation Committee, James Oberstar, to cooperate. (Oberstar has recently lambasted the FAA for allowing what he says are unsafe practices at LAX and at Southwest Airlines).

The pressure prompted the FAA to make another proposal this month, offering two choices. One is essentially the same “small” EMAS plan the council shot down six months ago. The second option is for a larger EMAS at the west end of the runway and no EMAS at the east end. (You read that right). The FAA claims the sole EMAS would be expected to stop the fastest kinds of jets if they’re going 70 knots or less, still far below their usual takeoff and landing speeds. Any faster and, presumably, they would still go out the other side of the EMAS. The same plane going east, of course, would encounter no EMAS at all.

Our neighborhood association, Friends of Sunset Park, with hundreds of members, has not changed its position. We still favor the relatively quick and inexpensive way to reduce aircraft overrun danger: ban the C and D aircraft. We hope the congressional delegation’s welcome help will continue. But the City Council, on March 25, should follow through on its unanimous action of four months ago and enact the ban. Or, the FAA could do the right thing and order the ban. We encourage the hundreds of citizens who turned out in November to return March 25th to remind the FAA and the city that we’ve lived with the threat of a jet overrun disaster long enough.

