

AIR WAR IN VEGAS WON'T STAY IN VEGAS

A battle over new flight paths is pitting city against county and neighborhoods against one another. It's a taste of what L.A. can expect.

By Jennifer Oldham
LA Times
November 19, 2006

LAS VEGAS - The aquamarine lake lapped at Greg Toussaint's well tended backyard, beckoning him to take his electric-powered boat, Two Saints, on a spin through serene canals here that border million-dollar homes.

The serenity will not last long: In a move that presents a cautionary tale for Southern California, the Federal Aviation Administration plans to reroute hundreds of departing flights from McCarran International Airport over Toussaint's community, known as The Lakes.

The flight path change has set the city of Las Vegas against Clark County, which operates the airport, and has driven a wedge between residents in this blossoming arid valley.

"It's pitted neighborhood against neighborhood, and that's awful," said real estate agent Diane Arcuri, who supports rerouting flights because it will give some noise relief to her Nevada Trails neighborhood, nine miles south of Toussaint's.

Such turbulence could arise on a much larger scale down south, as the FAA hopes to redesign highways in the sky over Los Angeles next year.

Like Las Vegas, the region is ringed by mountains on three sides and water on the fourth, forcing flights into limited airspace over millions of homes. Airports in both regions are squeezed by development, leaving no room to add runways. Residents are wary of flight paths closer to their homes.

"Because airports are landlocked, the opportunity for capacity increases rests in airspace redesign," testified William C. Withycombe, the FAA's Western-Pacific regional administrator at a federal aviation subcommittee hearing in Corona earlier this year.

In Southern California, the FAA hopes to receive funding next year to initially reconsider flight paths that crisscross 4,000 square miles bounded by Angeles Crest Highway on the north, the Pacific Ocean on the west, Banning Pass on the east and San Onofre on the south.

"The initial design of this airspace happened in the early 1970s," said Walter White, an FAA manager in Southern California. "It was designed at a time when we had Boeing 707s and DC-3s" and when Ontario International Airport was "simply not a player."

Southern California's airspace redesign will be far more complicated than Las Vegas' because it will involve reworking flight paths over multiple airports in many cities and counties.

In Nevada, officials are trying to cope with a 31% jump in flights at McCarran in the last five years. Starting in March, the FAA plans to shift 30% of the takeoffs, an average of 170 flights a day, to the right - a northwest flight path over many newly built homes in the city of Las Vegas. Today, most flights depart to the south, over dozens of new suburbs outside city boundaries.

The change is necessary because the current flight path restricts how many aircraft can take off in an hour, causing the airport to reduce traffic by up to a million passengers a year, said Randall H. Walker, the county's director of aviation. That translates into a \$33.1-million loss for the region's economy, officials found.

But the flight path change has outraged residents, many of whom moved into communities northwest of the airport after 2001. Thousands of newcomers argue that they paid a premium to buy within city limits in areas such as Summerlin - one of the West's largest and fastest-growing master-planned communities - because there was no commercial air traffic.

"I moved here because of the peace and tranquillity," said Robert Hall, a Summerlin resident and former pilot.

Hall and others contend residents living south of McCarran bought their homes knowing flights took off nearby. They add that fewer people live in those communities than in the cities of Las Vegas and North Las Vegas.

The Las Vegas City Council opposed the flight path change and hired a consultant to rebut the FAA's assertion that it is needed to improve efficiency at McCarran.

To reinforce its position, the City Council formed a citizens advisory panel, including former pilots who live in areas that will be affected by the change, which concluded in part that rerouting flights will endanger people in the city.

"I don't think anywhere else in U.S. do you intentionally route planes so they will intentionally go over high-rise buildings," said Toussaint.

But the FAA cites other cities, including Chicago and New York, where aircraft make a 180-degree turn after taking off and fly over densely populated communities.

"If the FAA doesn't come up with something to address current capacity demands, safety will become an issue, because everyone will be following the same procedure," said Jeff Jacquart, airport program administrator for the Clark County Department of Aviation, at an airport noise conference in Palm Springs earlier this year.

Public meetings held by the FAA over the past year to discuss the flight path change turned nasty when residents from different parts of the city confronted one another over the proposal.

"A man from Summerlin, his attitude was, 'I paid a lot of money for my house, I don't want to be bothered by the noise. You're living in the southwest; it's not as nice as Summerlin, why don't you move?' " recalled Arcuri, the Nevada Trails resident.

When the flight path change is enacted, communities to the northwest will experience less noise, Walker said. The loudest aircraft will be unable to turn to the northwest because they cannot climb quickly enough to avoid traffic from North Las Vegas Airport and Nellis Air Force Base.

But residents there say the quick climb required by the flight path shift only adds to their concerns about safety, because jets will be flying over smaller aircraft with student pilots in them, and fighter planes controlled by pilots from other countries who come to Nellis for training and may not understand English well.

After studying the flight path change for a year, the FAA announced this month it will impose the plan, prompting officials in the city of Las Vegas to threaten to sue.

"We'll be right in court," said Las Vegas Mayor Oscar Goodman. "It's David versus Goliath, the little city of Las Vegas versus the federal government."