

Sacramento County Airport System

Preamble

To prepare for this report the Sacramento Grand Jury toured Sacramento International Airport facilities and was briefed by the Director and the Airport Staff on McClellan, Mather Field, Sacramento International, and Sacramento Executive Airport (Executive). Tours were limited to Sacramento International and Executive Airports and included the passenger arrival and departure areas, the Sheriff's Department Airport Division, and the Airport Fire and Crash Rescue facilities. Interviews and information were gathered from Sacramento County and City Planning Departments, and the Sacramento County Airport Director and his staff. Officials provided us with ample information on all subjects.

The Sacramento County Airport System is responsible for operation of Sacramento International Airport, Executive Airport, and Franklin Field. The System has a contract with the Economic Development Department to operate McClellan Airport.

Sacramento International Airport (International) is one of four major passenger airports serving northern California, with increasing importance as population growth shifts eastward from San Francisco. Planned and built away from existing metropolitan areas in 1967, International has not to date been a significant nuisance to surrounding areas. It has not had to operate under pressures exerted by residential developments which have plagued many other regional airports serving developing metropolitan areas.

A former United States Air Force Base, Mather Field (Mather) now serves as the primary cargo airport for the greater Sacramento region, with private and corporate aircraft, including jets, welcomed.

The 2007-2008 Grand Jury wanted to make certain all steps are being taken to avoid a repeat of the aircraft tragedy at Farrell's Ice cream Parlor that occurred in the 1970's, and to address noise problems resulting from aircraft operation at Executive.

The City of Sacramento owns Executive Airport and contracts with the County Airports Dept. for the operation and maintenance of the facility. This is detailed in a 25-year lease between the City and the County Airports Department. If the City moved operations to other existing airports and ceased using Executive, the City would need to give a 25-year notice to the current operator.

Executive's current runways cannot be lengthened due to residential and commercial encroachment over several decades. Current operational policy does not include diverting the increasing usage of Executive by larger corporate jets, to Mather and McClellan which have longer, safer runways with less encroachment.

Noise and types of aircraft using Executive is on the increase, however use restrictions are dictated by the Federal Aviation Agency (FAA). Executive does not have discretionary authority on these activities. Executive is under three different noise restriction standards from the FAA,

the State, and the County. Currently, Executive elects to follow the more restrictive noise regulations promulgated by the County.

Airport Encroachment 2008

During its tour, and in response to inquiries made by members of the Grand Jury, it became apparent that there may be open issues remaining from the 2001–2002 Grand Jury Report. That information is incorporated here for purposes of conciseness and efficiency.

Issue

While development is a reality and a by-product of the robust economy in the Northern California area, it will impact expansion of Executive and may impact existing or planned operations at Mather and McClellan. The issue defined by the 2007-2008 Grand Jury was how to protect that expansion without impeding the development necessary to support Sacramento's growing economy and regional airline travel.

The 2001-2002 Grand Jury Report made recommendations, condensed as follows:

- Expedite approval of airport master plans for Mather Field and Sacramento International, showing runway requirements through 2035.
- Create a five-mile sphere of influence around both Mather and Sacramento International.
- Provide for category 3 runways at Mather and International.
- Enact and enforce changes in the General Plan to protect future airport growth options, and air operations.

During its tour, and in subsequent meetings, the 2007-2008 Grand Jury examined the Sacramento County and Airport staff response towards achieving those objectives.

Background and Facts

Because of its status as an active Air Force Base, Mather Field was protected from encroachment until 1990 by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors-approved Comprehensive Land Use Plan (CLUP), now known as the Airport Land Use Compatibility Plan (ALUCP).¹

The California Department of Transportation provides for an Airport Land Use Commission (ALUC) of immediate area government entities to produce a ALUCP. Average noise contours are drawn around the airport at the 60dB level, signifying a 24-hour average delineation of no

¹ ALUCP's use 24-hour noise contour lines to define operational perimeters. The decibel scale accommodates a wide range of intensities.

Time of day is also an important factor determining whether or not sounds are considered a nuisance. Sounds barely noticeable during daylight hours are much more disruptive during the night.

Numerous measurement scales have been developed to account for this time factor. Two of the more commonly used scales are the Community Noise Level (CNEL) and the daylight sound level (Ldn). The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency developed the Ldn measure, a 24-hour average sound level, in which a 10-decibel penalty is added to any sounds occurring between the hours of 10:00 p.m. and 7:00 a.m. The CNEEL is used in California airport noise regulations and adds an additional 5-decibel penalty for evening hours between 7:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m.

more than 60dBs. These are necessary in order to develop either an Environmental Impact Report, or ALUCP.

Removal of the Mather field CLUP by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors after the departure of the USAF left Mather without a Land Use Plan or an Airport Master Plan. Lacking an Airport Master Plan, Mather lost much of the buffer provided by the open ranch land to residential developments.

The 2007-2008 Grand Jury notes the following progress since 2002:

- A Master Plan for Sacramento International Airport was approved by the Board of supervisors in August 2007.
- Sacramento International has a Category 3 runway.² Mather has a Category 1 runway which requires some weather diversions to International during low ceilings or visibility conditions. The Airport Director has agreed to delay Mather's Category 3 runway upgrade until after the Environmental Impact Study was completed. This will delay Mather's Category 3 upgrade by several years. Mather's Master Plan also awaits completion of the Environmental Impact Study.
- Sacramento County has required and incorporated Avigation³ and Noise Easements into the deeds of developments within International, Mather, and McClellan Policy Planning Areas.
- Sacramento County has placed restrictions on residential development within the 60 decibel contour lines delineated in the ALUCP's.

While these are positive accomplishments, if history is any teacher, "moving to the nuisance" has negatively impacted airport flight operations. In short, "being there first," or being "on notice" of air operations has not been successful quelling complaints against air operations.

Of concern to this Grand Jury, and referenced in the 2001–2002 Grand Jury report, is the location of residential development and other noise-sensitive uses of land areas near current and planned airport activities in the region. Avigation and Noise Easements do not preclude homeowner over-reaction if air operations are increased or expanded.

The most critical time of flight is during and shortly after take-off when aircraft are at maximum weight and maximum power, attempting to gain altitude and airspeed, so that if something does go wrong the aircraft has enough airspeed and power to return and make a safe landing. Developments approved that lie directly below known flight patterns, or under departure/approach paths, carry a small, but possible, risk.

² A runway with a Category 3 Instrument Landing System rating permits landings under much lower visibility and cloud ceilings than is allowed on a runway with a Category 1 rating.

³ An Avigation Easement is a deed-recorded easement that grants right-of-flight over property -- above specified heights -- permitting excessive noise, vibration, discomfort, inconvenience, interference with use and enjoyment, and any consequent reduction in market value, due to the operation of aircraft to and from the airport.

Flood Insurance

Mather has an 11,300 foot-runway, while McClellan's runway length is 10,600 feet, 2,000 feet longer than International's dual 8,600-foot runways. Sacramento is in the unique position of being able to better respond to any airport flood disaster much better than other American cities with regional airports at risk for flooding.

A levee breach along the Sacramento River could flood and close Sacramento International Airport. Closing International would require transfer of as much of International's traffic to McClellan and Mather Field as they could handle, in addition to disaster relief air traffic and their use as emergency recovery staging areas.

Sacramento County has recognized this possibility and is developing an airport flood disaster plan, including relocating of assets and the partial continuity of air operations.

Findings and Recommendations

Finding 1. Sacramento International's Master Plan was approved by the Board of Supervisors in late 2007. It was drafted as a 20-year plan. However, as a result of the complex environmental reviews now required which take up to a cumulative eight years before completion, International's Master Plan is now a 12-year plan. Even though updates are planned every 5 years, it remains a short term airport plan.

Recommendation 1. Future airport master plans should be 30-Year Plans to take into account the impact of delays resulting from complex environmental reviews and extensive community input required prior to approval.

Finding 2A. New residential development within the 60 CNEL noise exposure curve for Sacramento International, Mather, or McClellan Airports is prohibited by CLUCP's.

Finding 2B. New developments within the Airport Planning Policy Areas should have Avigation and Noise Easements recorded on each residential parcel in favor of Sacramento County. However, Avigation and Noise Easements will not prevent law suits in the case of an aircraft accident. In addition, culpability would almost certainly be magnified if the accident involved developments approved below known flight paths/patterns.⁴

Finding 2C. Mather's future as an important cargo hub has been jeopardized by developments impacting options required for a major extension of its secondary runway. Unless steps are taken to protect Sacramento International Airport, it too may lose future regional expansion options.

⁴ Navigable air space under Federal law is generally air space at least 1,500 feet above terrain. Most instrument approaches to runways use a 3 degree descent for landings. Using a 3 degree approach, an aircraft passes through 1,500 feet above runway elevation 5.4 miles from the runway touchdown point.

Recommendation 2. Sacramento County should ensure that land use restrictions and Avigation and Noise Easements are mandatory for all developments approved within International's Airport Policy Planning Area, to include neighboring counties.⁵

Finding 3A. County Airport staff has not provided a sufficient response to development proposals necessary to balance political and economic pressures from population growth which may hinder future airport expansion plans.

Finding 3B. The long range protection of Sacramento's airport assets, critical for regional economic and transportation viability, demand an informed aviation advocate. At times County Airport Staff has been silent responding to developments presented to the Board of Supervisors, and oftentimes became an agency of compromise.

Recommendation 3. The County Board of Supervisors should establish an Aviation Committee of select airport and County staff directly responsible for overseeing and advocating the long-term regional importance and viability of Sacramento's airport system. Direct representation by regional airport experts on the Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) is recommended.

Finding 4. Executive Airport's 5,500 foot runway is totally encroached by development.

Recommendation 4. As appropriate, and without jeopardizing current flight operations, the County Airport Director should discourage jet aircraft from using Executive Airport, and, through incentives, encourage jet aircraft to use Mather Field, McClellan or International.

Response Requirements

Penal Code sections 933 and 933.5 require that specific responses to both the Findings and Recommendations contained in this report be submitted to the Presiding Judge of the Sacramento Superior Court by October 1, 2008, from:

- **Sacramento County Board of Supervisors, Findings 1, 2A, 2B, 2C, 3A, 3B, and 4; Recommendations 1, 2, 3, and 4.**

⁵ The 2007-2008 Grand Jury recognizes previous outreach efforts by the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors to jurisdictions encompassed by the airport Policy Planning Areas.