

Santa Monica council votes to close the city's airport by July 2018

LA Times

By Dan Weikel

AUG 24, 2016

For decades, residents living around Santa Monica Municipal Airport have complained about the roar of aircraft and worried that some day a Piper Cub or Gulf Stream will come crashing into their living room. The Santa Monica City Council first voted to shut down the airport in 1981. That effort stalled before takeoff, but on Tuesday, Santa Monica's elected officials again pledged to close the historic facility that was once home to Douglas Aircraft Co. but is now the roost of several hundred propeller and jet aircraft, including those owned by celebrities such as actor Harrison Ford.

It won't be easy, however, as the legal opposition from aviation interests and the federal government has not waned since that first attempt 35 years ago.

Today, pilots take off and land more than 300 times a day from the general aviation airport, just a few hundred feet from homes in some areas.

After hearing from scores of airport opponents and supporters, the council unanimously approved a resolution Tuesday night to reduce flights and close the embattled airport by July 1, 2018.

"Our council and community, in solidarity, want to close the airport that predominately caters to the 1% that can afford to travel by private jet," Mayor Pro Tem Ted Winterer said. "There are real legal obstacles, and while we need to be conscientious as we navigate the court system, our resolve to close the airport is firm."

The resolution contained a package of measures designed to minimize environmental impacts and scale back flight operations, especially those of private and corporate jets, until the airport can be shut down. They include petitioning the Federal Aviation Administration to reduce the length of the 5,000-foot runway by 2,000 feet on the west side.

The measure also calls for eliminating the sale of leaded fuel, adding security, creating a permit system instead of leases for aviation tenants and stepped-up enforcement of local, state and federal laws related to airport operations. To help curtail jet operations, the council approved the creation of a city-run operation to replace two private companies that provide aeronautical services such as fuel, maintenance and aircraft storage.

If established, the council hopes to remove incentives for private companies to market their services to the operators of corporate and personal jets. Airport opponents say they plan to replace the 227-acre facility with a park that would include cultural events, sports fields and other recreation facilities.

"The land needs to be transformed from a source of pollution and potential danger into a community asset," Mayor Tony Vasquez said.

The city, however, faces substantial opposition from airport tenants, local and national aviation groups and the FAA, which cite federal agreements since World War II that require the airport to remain open at least until 2023 if not in perpetuity.

"This decision is misguided and a bad idea," said John Jerabek, treasurer of the Santa Monica Airport Assn. "It is not in the public interest to close the airport." After years of controversy, a federal appeals court in 2011 rejected the city's attempt to ban certain high-performance jets from the airport.

This month, the FAA ruled for a second time that Santa Monica is obligated to keep the airport open until 2023 to comply with requirements of a \$250,000 federal grant it received in 2003.

"The FAA expects the city to comply with its federal obligations to operate the airport and to provide access to aeronautical users," FAA officials said Wednesday in a prepared statement. "The FAA will continue to work with the city to ensure the airport remains available to those users."

City officials say they will challenge the decision in federal court.

Santa Monica is facing another complaint to the FAA that accuses the city of imposing unreasonable landing fees, illegally diverting airport funds to nonaviation uses and setting unfair leasing policies to force out aeronautical tenants. A decision is pending. In addition, a city lawsuit to free the airport from its federal agreements is scheduled for trial in late 2017 in U.S. District Court in Los Angeles. A federal appeals court reinstated the case this year after it was dismissed.