

Poison Money

Wainscott

September 20, 2011

Dear David:

Town Councilman Dominick Stanzone has been advocating shifting helicopter traffic from north of the airport to south of the airport to spread the pain around. He describes this as “burden sharing.” It would indeed be burden sharing, but it seems not to occur to him or the rest of the board majority to ask why the community should bear this burden at all. What community purpose is served by allowing a very small number of wealthy people to commute by helicopter while depriving not hundreds, but thousands, of the peaceful enjoyment of their own homes? And not just anywhere, but in East Hampton, a refuge, a place justly regarded as one of the most beautiful on Earth.

What are the numbers? We don’t know for sure because the town board has failed to perform either the cost-benefit analysis or the single-event noise analysis that are specifically required by our own town code in connection with any new airport master plan. These provisions were written into the town code more than a decade ago just so that future decisions about the airport would have to be made on the basis of a public factual record rather than upon the unsupported claims of parties on both sides.

Apparently, this town board prefers to decide in ignorance. Given that the town board continues to do nothing, at least nothing effective, to mitigate noise while proposing yet more airport upgrades, the suspicion grows that an honest cost-benefit analysis and honest accounting of the burden of airport noise would not be very favorable to airport interests and that the town board knows it.

Even though the town board refuses to gather the information required by the town code, we can make some pretty reasonable estimates. There are a bit fewer than 100 “based” single and twin-engine propeller-driven aircraft at East Hampton Airport. There are approximately 6,000 annual helicopter operations and approximately 3,000 annual jet operations. Most of these operations are not by aircraft based in East Hampton. Then there are 7,000 to 8,000 annual operations by “itinerant” propeller aircraft not based in East Hampton, visitors.

An operation is either a take-off or a landing. So, for landings, divide all the operations numbers by two. Helicopters tend mostly to ferry passengers. They drop off or pick up, and leave again. We can assume therefore that each week-end arrival by helicopter requires four operations in all. That is 1,500 arrivals per year. The jets are more likely to land and remain until the passengers depart. 3,000 operations is therefore also about 1,500 arrivals per year.

Of course, if some of the helicopters remain in East Hampton waiting for their passengers, then helicopter arrivals would be a bit higher. And if some of the jets ferry passengers, then the number of jet arrivals would be a bit lower. But these are reasonable estimates given the failure of the town board to do its job and gather the actual data.

Let us assume that each household that uses jets or helicopters travels to East Hampton 15 times a year. We then end up with about 100 “based” propeller-driven aircraft used for recreational flying, 100 households (including guests) commuting by helicopter, and 100 households (again including guests) commuting by jet. That totals 300 households that make consistent use of East Hampton Airport.

However, the airport is literally right on the Southampton line and is as close or closer to a Southampton population twice that of East Hampton, even ignoring a third of the population of Southampton that is too far west. To be generous, we can therefore assume that not more than half of the consistent airport users are East Hampton residents. Probably the real number is between 30 and 40 percent. Thus, the East Hampton Airport serves approximately 120 to 150 East Hampton households.

On the negative side, airport noise adversely impacts 114 square miles and a resident population of 39,000 (including residents of Southampton). The areas most heavily impacted, with more than 1,000 noise events exceeding East Hampton's own noise standard per year per household, include an area of 31 square miles with a population of more than 6,000. Households impacted between 6,000 and 25,000 times per year cover an area of 18 square miles with a population of more than 3,000.

Even if we assume that two-thirds of the adversely affected households are in Southampton, the number of East Hampton residents who must share the burden of East Hampton Airport is many times the number of people who use it. And the number of residents of Southampton who are forced to bear the burden is likewise many times the number of Southampton residents who use it.

That brings us back full circle to the original question. Why do we need to bear the burden of the airport at all? It is a nice amenity for a very few who save a bit of time commuting at the expense of many and a hobby for an even smaller number.

Those who are burdened are not invading the homes and yards of the people who use the airport. It is they who impose themselves on the rest of us.

When the airport served only small aircraft, it wasn't much of an issue, hardly noticed. The airport became an issue because of money and technology, the introduction of jets and helicopters (with noisy seaplanes the latest nuisance) as a means of commuting. We can go back to an airport limited to relatively unintrusive small aircraft if we stop taking money from the Federal Aviation Administration. F.A.A. subsidies do not save money for the taxpayers; they save money for the airport users, making it cheaper for them.

If the airport were supported by its users through landing fees and fuel taxes, then, when the current covenants with the F.A.A. expire on Dec. 31, 2014, the town board would regain the power to control its hours of operations and the numbers and types of aircraft that use it in order to protect the community from intrusive noise.

The only thing standing in the way is the refusal of airport users, thus far, to pay their own way. They like their toys and they want the public to pay for them too. It is only their addiction to the subsidy of F.A.A. grants and the willingness of the East Hampton Town Board to pander to them that makes them an affliction for the rest of us. There is no rational reason for them to continue to make themselves our burden to share, in the mind of Mr. Stanzione, unless you consider greed and lack of regard for other people to be rational reasons. I don't.

We have an election in East Hampton in a few weeks. If you are among those forced to share the burden of the airport, consider casting your vote for those candidates who are willing to get rid of the F.A.A. and its poison money in order to return local control of the airport to East Hampton.

Sincerely,

David Gruber