

Reject the Opportunity

East Hampton

September 26, 2011

Dear Editor

The Northwest Alliance has for many years complained about the longstanding practice of routing incoming helicopter flights over Northwest Creek. The creek is part of a large, estuarine nature preserve that is home to a variety of threatened and sensitive species. As helicopter traffic has increased, the number of piping plovers nesting in the area has decreased, as has the fecundity of their efforts.

After years of observing this worsening situation, we have come to the conclusion that the current level of helicopter traffic is simply unacceptable. Further, the certain prospect of increased traffic as the economy recovers is incrementally more unacceptable.

In an attempt to understand how to pursue a reduction in helicopter traffic over this nature preserve, we have met with town and airport officials and we have followed the arguments of the many groups and individuals addressing this issue in these pages. We are very pleased that the town board and the airport management have recently convinced the Federal Aviation Administration to encourage some pilots to approach and leave East Hampton Airport over the Georgica Pond area. The F.A.A. has not agreed to pursue a formal route requirement, but it will apply informal pressure on the pilots to choose the Atlantic route. This will almost certainly afford the Northwest area some relief, though at the expense of increasing traffic over Georgica Pond. There are sensitive wildlife populations there as well, but this result would at least be more equitable.

We are also pleased that the town has taken concrete steps toward the installation of a seasonal control tower. In addition to the safety benefits of such a facility, the tower will strengthen the pilots' compliance with altitude requirements within a five-mile radius of the airport. We understand, however, that aircraft customarily descend or ascend through about that same distance, which limits the relief from low-flying helicopters that the tower can provide.

Unfortunately, neither of these steps can address what we see as the primary problem: excessive airport traffic and the resulting noise pollution. Because accepting F.A.A. grants for capital projects incurs "grant assurances" that require 24/7, 365 access to all aircraft that can safely land at the airport, neither the control tower nor more distributed routing can reduce traffic.

It has become clear to us that if we want to reduce airport traffic, we can only do so if we reject the opportunity to partially fund the airport through F.A.A. grants.

With relief from grant assurances we will be entitled to establish and enforce a variety of policies that would reduce noise. As was done in New York City, our partner in most of the helicopter traffic, we could preclude access by aircraft on the basis of the amount of noise they make. We could set enforceable curfews and could limit access by auctioning landing time slots. We, therefore, ask our town board, which has worked so hard and effectively to achieve noise-abatement at our airport, to take the next step and reject F.A.A. funding.

Sincerely,

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Subcommittee