

New Coalition Seeks to Limit Aircraft Noise | The Sag Harbor Express

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By Claire Walla

In the height of the summer season, when many of the city's Hamptons-bound denizens take to the skies to circumvent traffic, local discontent over noisy aircraft tends to bubble to the surface.

Two weeks ago, these sentiments coalesced in the form of a new organization called The Quiet Skies Coalition (QSC).

"The amount of traffic using the airport uncontrolled is mind-boggling," said QSC member Bob Wolfram, a resident of Carlisle Lane in Sag Harbor.

He pointed to the very first QSC meeting to illustrate his point. When founding members of the grass-roots coalition were gathered in QSC Chairman Barry Raebeck's backyard (a two-minute drive from the airport), Wolfram said he counted precisely 12 small planes, five jets and two helicopters, all of which flew over the property in the course of the two-hour meeting, from 10 a.m. to noon.

"We had to stop talking when they flew over," he said.

While local efforts have voiced strong opinions against aircraft noise for years, Raebeck said this coalition (which already has about 140 members) represents a stronger, more far-reaching alliance, all united under the notion that airplanes and helicopters "are an aural and visual blight to the East End," Raebeck explained. "They are for the benefit of a wealthy few, at the expense of everyone else."

East Hampton Town has currently set recommended restrictions on airplane travel between the hours of 11 p.m. and 7 a.m. And it encourages planes and helicopters to travel no lower than 2,500 feet for as long as possible before reaching the East Hampton tarmac.

"They have recommendations, but no one is enforcing them," Raebeck continued.

For members of the Quiet Skies Coalition, many problems with the airport stem from the fact that the town has collected grant money from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which in effect bars the town from regulating any of these restrictions. "The town has abdicated all responsibility. [The East Hampton Airport] is legally and technically an 'uncontrolled airport,'" Raebeck said.

Airport manager Jim Brundige confirmed that airport regulation is in the hands of the FAA, which forbids the town from limiting access to the airport, even imposing time restrictions. The town accepted money from the FAA as recently as 2001 for minor repairs like repaving, Brundige explained. And because FAA grants carry a stipulation that binds airports to federal aviation regulations for a 20-year period, this means East Hampton Town must adhere to FAA rules through 2021.

Congressman Tim Bishop — who has been involved with efforts to regulate helicopter noise on the East End — said the town will have to decide, once the 20-year period is up, whether or not to continue receiving grant money.

"If they don't, then the obligation would fall to the tax payers of East Hampton," he explained.

In general, Bishop said FAA regulations are reasonable. However, "I don't want to say aircraft noise needs to be reduced, but it needs to be regulated in some way."

According to East Hampton Town Councilman Dominick Stanzione, that's exactly what he, as the airport liaison, has been working on for the past year.

"Helicopter traffic is a regional problem that starts in Manhattan," Stanzione explained. Along with elected officials in Southold, Shelter Island, Riverhead and Southampton, he said he's reestablished the town's relationship with the FAA to establish a southern route to the airport. (He said the town would officially announce the new route in the next couple of weeks.) Stanzione estimated this would cut traffic over the northern communities down by about 60 percent.

"We call it burden-sharing," he added.

Stanzione also said the town is working with the FAA to get permission to place a seasonal control tower at the airport, as well.

"If we have permission to install this seasonal control tower, then we will have effective control in and around East Hampton," he said. In the end, he added, "I suspect the town's new relationship with the FAA will provide helpful improvements with noise management, and provide the best possible solutions for our neighbors."

But the QSC is calling for more than just an additional southern route. Airplanes and helicopters, the group contends, carry more burden than noise pollution. They are also hazardous to the environment.

"It's a quality of life issue," QSC member Bob Wolfram continued. "The East End of Long Island is a beautiful place. [Little pieces] get chipped away over time," he admitted. "But the growth of the airport has taken a big hunk out of our quality of life."

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