

Helicopter Noise Community Meeting Summary

Date: May 30, 2018

Participating Agencies and Panelists

Robert Owens, Assistant District Manager, *Federal Aviation Administration*

Lt. John Matula, Commander, Aviation Section, *U.S. Park Police*

Col. Scott Grundahl, Commander, 811th Operations Group, *U.S. Air Force*

Maj. Patrick Johnsen, Marine Helicopter Squadron One Operations, *U.S. Marine Corps*

Lt. Col. Brendan Cullinan, Commander, 12th Aviation Battalion, *U.S. Army*

Jeffery Carroll, Assistant Chief, *Metropolitan Police Department*

Lt. Col. Jonathan S. Ebbert, Director of Military Support, *District of Columbia National Guard*

Lt. Col. Jeffery Wingblade, Commander, *District of Columbia National Guard Aviation Forces*

Goal of the Meeting

- Helicopter noise is an issue affecting the District as a whole, but especially residents in Wards 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8.
- The goal of this community meeting was to hear from residents and agencies managing flight paths and operating helicopters in the District, learn more about the causes of increased helicopter noise and identify potential solutions for minimizing the disruption caused by helicopter noise.

Scope of the Problem

- Residents have noted an increase in the frequency of helicopter noise. Residents who have lived in the city for decades noted that they have observed a marked increase in frequency compared to prior years.
- In some instances, the vibrations from helicopter noise are so intense that homes shake.
- Residents noted that in some parts of the city, e.g. California Street, helicopters have not necessarily been flying more frequently, but they do appear to be flying lower.
- Residents stated that they noticed helicopter noise at various times throughout the week, including Fridays and Saturday mornings. This has negatively affected their quality of life.

Current Helicopter Activity

- D.C. National Guard: Lt. Col. Wingblade noted the importance of training and the need for frequent flights. Pilots come out of flight school with about 100 to 120 hours of flight time and pilots are constantly flying to accumulate more hours as they work toward Pilot in Command (PIC) status. Pilots sometimes have to accumulate 600 hours to be a PIC.

- Lt. Col. Wingblade mentioned that the latest he flies is around 10:30 p.m., but said that most of his flights were at 8:30 a.m. or 9 a.m.
- Lt. Col. Wingblade noted that some degree of nighttime flying is necessary for pilots because they must become proficient with night-vision goggles.
- U.S. Air Force: Col. Grundahl noted that Air Force flights in the area have not increased. He noted that the number of nighttime flights have actually decreased and that there has been an overall reduction of 14 flights per week. However, Col. Grundahl also mentioned that people may be seeing more flights in the afternoon.
 - A member of the audience noted that two-blade helicopters are the loudest helicopters.
 - Col. Grundahl noted that the Air Force currently uses two-blade helicopters.
 - Col. Grundahl noted that the Army has conducted a compatible use study that is available through standard FOIA requests.
- Residents in attendance wondered whether planes had begun flying at lower altitudes.
 - Panelists stated that their agencies have not been flying lower or more frequently.
 - However, panelists noted that pilots sometimes have to lower flight altitude to assist with Medevac or to investigate crime activity.
- Federal Aviation Administration (FAA): The FAA noted that it conducted a study last year using information gathered from radar replays and counts of helicopter traffic that showed a bit of a decrease in helicopter operations in the area. However, this study did not measure altitude.
- WebTrack—This is a radar tracking system that has been running for a few years.
 - The Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority launched DCA WebTrack in January of 2015. WebTrack is a public portal that allows users to view current and historical flight activity and noise levels in the metropolitan Washington region.
 - *Link:* <http://www.flyreagan.com/dca/dca-reagan-national-webtrak-ops-noise-portal>
- A constituent noted problems from lack of regulation around rotor-wing aircraft vs. fixed-wing aircraft, which are more tightly regulated.
- A constituent also noted that there are three main helicopter flight paths over the District.
- Animal Welfare—Constituent raised concerns about animal welfare and the potential adverse effects of helicopter noise and activity on humans as well as animals.
- George Washington University (GW) Hospital Helipad Issue
 - GW wants to change an existing D.C. law, the Helicopter Landing Pad Nuisance Act of 1987, which prohibits helipads in residential areas. GW is one of two Level 1 trauma centers in the District, but of the two, only MedStar Washington Hospital Center has a place for helicopters to land. Airlifted trauma patients treated at GW are currently dropped off near Nationals Park and then transported to GW by ambulance.
 - Constituents asserted that GW refuses to pay for studies about noise impacts in the community and also refuses to pay for restoration work to repair any damage caused by increased helicopter activity. They noted that hospitals in other areas

are paying for soundproofing and restoration of homes. Constituents expressed concerns about noise as well as the safety of buildings and damage that could occur as a result of helicopter activity. Constituents also worry that changing the existing law would allow other hospitals in residential areas to follow suit in constructing their own helipads and increase helicopter noise activity in the area.

- The Congresswoman noted that she cannot overturn D.C. law without losing the valuable credibility she has accrued in her efforts to keep the House and Senate from overturning D.C. laws. The helipad decision is a District matter, and not a federal matter. She also expressed that she understood constituents' concerns and would have staff contact the D.C. Council to learn more and monitor developments.
- *Update:* Staff from the Congresswoman's office contacted the office of the Chairman of the D.C. Council, Phil Mendelson, to discuss the legislation that would allow the construction of the helipad. We are aware that this measure passed in the Council in early June and has been signed by the mayor.
- A constituent noted the link between helicopter/aviation noise and high cholesterol levels that was identified in an American Heart Society [sic] study.
 - Upon further review, we did not see a study by the American Heart Association on this issue. However, there are other studies that show a correlation between airport noise and the risk of high blood pressure and heart problems.

Ideas Raised by Audience

- Modifications to current training practices: One resident mentioned the idea of cutting down on the number of training hours that must be completed within D.C. and perhaps allowing some of those training hours to be accumulated in areas outside of D.C., while allowing pilots to finish geography training in D.C.
- Finding ways to limit flights at night and fly more helicopters during the afternoon so as not to disturb residents.
 - However, panelists noted that some flights at night are necessary because night flying is a critical part of the training required for pilot certification.
- There is a general desire to learn more about the cause of the greater prevalence of helicopter noise in D.C. neighborhoods. Specifically, residents are asking for data noting the frequency of flights over neighborhoods with information provided on each agency flying, the times of each flight, flight altitude, number of laps each helicopter makes, routes and zones and more information on how many flights occur during the day vs. the night.
- The owner of the South Capitol Street Helipad attended the meeting and committed to collecting information on helicopter activity at the helipad and making this information publicly available.
- The Congresswoman noted the need for regulation and coordination among agencies on hours of training and the amount of training that has to be completed in this area rather than varying hours of training decided separately by each agency. She also agreed with

residents who mentioned that we need more information on the number of flights occurring during the day and night.

- Outstanding Questions:
 - Why do some agencies fly helicopters at different altitudes?
 - What is contributing to the increase in severity and frequency of helicopter noise in the area?

Congresswoman's Next Steps Announced at Meeting

- The office will share a copy of the notes and key takeaways from the community meeting with the public.
- We will provide a space for the public to provide feedback on our summary and note anything they would like for us to include.
- The Congresswoman will review the feedback from the public and convene a meeting with the Government Accountability Office (GAO) as well as the ANC commissioners from affected wards to discuss next steps.
- The Congresswoman will request a GAO report on the issue of helicopter activity and noise in D.C. She will specifically request that the GAO cross the line among agencies to gather complete information on all helicopter activity in the area.

Feedback from the Congresswoman

The Congresswoman's office will continue engaging with the issue of helicopter noise in the District by obtaining additional information on the following questions and potential solutions.

Question: In addition to resulting from routine operations of various agencies, some helicopter noise in the District is also related to training exercises. What actions could agencies take to minimize noise from training activities while also retaining high-quality training programs?

Remedy: One potential solution could involve agencies operating helicopters in the District reducing the training hours that must occur in the District, especially at night.

Question: Constituents noted that helicopter activity sometimes continues late into the night, disrupting sleep schedules and negatively impacting quality of life. The National Guard mentioned that pilots sometimes fly as late as 10:30 p.m. as part of larger training exercises designed to prepare pilots to use night-vision goggles. What can be done to minimize disruption to residents while also ensuring that pilots have access to night training?

Remedy: While we appreciate the need for pilots to develop expertise in using night-vision goggles, flight times of 10:30 p.m. have a tendency to disrupt the sleep of residents. A potential mitigating measure may be to have pilots conduct night-vision training earlier in the evening at times when it is still dark, but not quite sleeping time for many people (e.g. 9 p.m. or 8:30 p.m. during winter), so as not to disrupt the sleep of residents.

Question: Residents noted that it appears that helicopters are flying at lower altitudes than they have in prior years. What solutions should be explored to reduce the prevalence of low-flying helicopters?

Remedy: Agencies should consider instructing their pilots to refrain from flying at low altitudes unless assisting with criminal investigations or medical evacuations.

Question: How much louder are two-blade helicopters than other helicopters? How many of the helicopters flying over the District are two-blade helicopters?

Remedy: The Congresswoman's staff will request additional information on the make of the helicopters flying over the District. This information request may be submitted as part of a proposal for a GAO study on helicopter noise in the District.

Question: Have any of the agencies present conducted studies on helicopter noise?

Remedy: Robert Owens, the panelist representing the FAA, noted that the FAA conducted a study last year using information gathered from radar replays and counts of helicopter traffic. However, this study did not measure altitude. Col. Grundahl also noted that the Army conducted a compatible use study that is available through a standard FOIA request. The Congresswoman's staff will review these studies and learn what gaps in information remain that should be addressed in future studies.

Question: Why are fixed wing aircraft more tightly regulated than rotor wing aircraft? Perhaps additional regulation of rotor wing aircraft could help address the issue of helicopter noise within the District by leading to greater coordination among agencies on best practices, flight hours and altitudes.

Remedy: The Congresswoman's staff will conduct research into the reasons for the tighter regulation of fixed wing aircraft compared to rotor wing aircraft and explore potential regulatory reforms that may help decrease helicopter noise in residential areas.

Question: The D.C. Council recently passed a measure that would allow the GW Hospital helipad project to move forward. What steps can be taken to minimize the impact of GW Hospital helipad operations on the overall noise level of the surrounding area?

Remedy: The Congresswoman's staff will learn more about the extent to which the Council examined the effectiveness of soundproofing for noise reduction. During the meeting, residents mentioned that hospitals in other areas paid to soundproof homes that were affected by hospital helicopter operations. The Congresswoman's staff will conduct additional research on the prevalence of soundproofing in areas with helicopter noise and how many of these soundproofing efforts were financed by hospital systems operating helicopters in the surrounding areas.

Question: What neighborhoods are most affected by helicopter noise?

Remedy: The Congresswoman's office will request additional information regarding the neighborhoods that are most affected by helicopter noise. This information request may be submitted as part of a proposal for a GAO study on helicopter noise in the District.

Question: How many flights occur per month, on average, at the South Capitol Street Helipad, considering that commercial flight in the District was greatly limited after 9/11 and completely prohibited in 2005?

Remedy: The owner of the South Capitol Street Helipad attended the community meeting and committed to collecting information on helicopter activity at the helipad and making this information publicly available. The Congresswoman's staff will remain in contact with the South Capitol Street Helipad to obtain information about flight frequency.

Question: What degree of coordination currently exists among the various agencies operating helicopters in the District?

Remedy: The Congresswoman's staff will follow up with the agencies to learn more about the degree of coordination that currently exists among the various agencies operating helicopters in the District. This information request may be submitted as part of a proposal for a GAO study on helicopter noise in the District.