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Mather runway debate continues

Officials say it should be lengthened for backup use, but opponents are dubious.

By Molly Dugan -- Bee Staff Writer - (*Published December 7, 2003*)

Sacramento County supervisors Tuesday will consider a draft master plan for Mather Airport that includes extending a secondary runway, a proposal that has come under fire from nearby residents.

The board in August agreed to include the runway expansion in the draft master plan, but neighbors are trying to persuade them to leave it out of the final version.

The runway, at 6,040 feet, is too short for air cargo planes and is only used for general aviation. The county wants to expand it to 7,200 feet with an option to add another 1,300 feet.

The landing path lies north of the main runway, which is 11,300 feet long.

The expansion would allow air cargo planes enough room to land on the second runway.

"The intent is to use it as a backup runway," said Rob Leonard, assistant director of the Sacramento County Airport System. "It's not there to serve as additional capacity."

But that's precisely what concerns residents living under the Mather flight path.

The airport is "going to become a huge air cargo hub, and the second cargo runway is the last step needed to do that," said Folsom resident Glen Otey.

There is no limit on the number of flights in and out of Mather Airport. Currently, there is an average of 10 flights per day, and in 20 years that figure is expected to peak at 24 flights per day, Leonard said.

Mather Airport is designed to be a small West Coast hub, Leonard said.

"We don't envision the sheer demand ever pushing the need for a two-runway operation," Leonard said. "By having the north runway longer, it just allows (businesses) to operate instead of being locked out of Mather or stuck on the ground."

Some neighbors remain suspicious that the second runway will attract more freight planes. More cargo flights mean more noise and air pollution, leading to a degradation of quality of life for nearby residents, Otey said.

An environmental analysis will be conducted to look at options for reducing noise and air pollution, county officials said. The study must be completed before the final master plan is adopted.

The estimated cost to expand the runway to 7,200 feet is \$14.7 million. About 90 percent of the funding would come from the Federal Aviation Administration, and the remainder would be paid by local airport fees and the state.

The policy of using the second runway as a backup, not a main airstrip, would not be enforced by law.

But most pilots respect the policies of airports and prefer to land on the longer runways, Leonard said.

Most companies require pilots to use the longest runway with the best approach and lighting, which at Mather Airport would be the main runway, he continued.

"If there's a runway there, we can't tell a pilot they can't use it," Leonard said. "Pilots, if given the choice between a long runway and a short runway, they're going to choose the long runway."

The Board of Supervisors is set to consider the draft master plan at 3:30 p.m. Tuesday at 700 H St., Sacramento.

About the Writer

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