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El Dorado supes want Mather to address plane noise

By Cathy Locke - clocke@sacbee.com

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El Dorado County officials say they will work to ensure that noise caused by low-flying cargo planes is addressed in the environmental analysis of Sacramento County's master plan for development of Mather Airport.

But the Board of Supervisors declined Tuesday to take a position on the master plan or a lawsuit filed by the city of Folsom challenging the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors' decision in October that allows expansion of DHL Express cargo facilities at Mather. Board members instead said they will press for solutions to noise problems through the environmental analysis required for the plan.

Supervisor Ron Briggs had asked his colleagues to review the airport master plan and consider what actions the board might take in light of ongoing complaints from county residents who say they are being awakened at night and in the early morning hours by cargo planes flying over their homes.

Briggs, a resident of the rural Gold Hill area, between Coloma and Placerville, said he now counts himself among those residents affected by the noise. The aircraft used to come in further north over the American River, he said, but "the planes have been scooting further south."

In the past year and a half, Briggs said, they've been flying over his house.

Supervisor Rusty Dupray said overflight noise has been an issue since he was elected to the board seven years ago, as it was for his predecessor. The complaints come in cycles, Dupray said, adding that he hadn't received any for about a year, but calls began coming in again recently.

When airplanes follow the prescribed flight path, he said, there is a significant decrease in noise.

"The problem is, they don't do it consistently," Dupray said, adding that it's up to pilots to choose the landing approach they deem necessary for their safety and the safety of the aircraft.

El Dorado County may have to consider litigation at some point, Dupray said, but he argued against joining Folsom's lawsuit because it does not directly address the airport master plan.

But, he said, "By Folsom taking on Mather in this regard, I think it's got their attention."

Folsom seeks a temporary restraining order to halt the county's implementation of its new lease amendment with Midwest Development Co. and its sub-tenant, DHL Express. Because the improvements are included in the draft master plan, Folsom officials argue that they should not be approved until the environmental review for the plan is completed.

Hardy Acree, Sacramento County airport director, attended Tuesday's board meeting. The improvements targeted by the lawsuit, he said, involve expanding the parking lot for DHL employees, who had started using other tenants' parking and parking on the street, Acree said.

The parking lot expansion is covered by an environmental impact report completed in 1994 for current airport facilities, he said. Acree said the need for additional parking for facilities leased by Midwest Development Co. was anticipated, adding that it was to be provided at such time as airport directors deemed it necessary.

"It does not add one ounce of airspace or airfield capacity," Acree said.

The overflight noise issue is complicated, he said. A 2004 test that involved shifting the flight path further south met with such protest that it was cut short, he recalled.

Noise complaints won't go away "until they design an aircraft you can't see and you can't hear," Acree said.

Folsom resident Bill Bryant urged El Dorado County supervisors to be alert to actions like the recent change in the airport lease agreement, saying it amounted to a piecemeal approach to the expansion proposed in the master plan. He argued that the 1994 environmental report provides "stale information."

"We need to stop them from doing a blink here and a blink there," he said.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said the environmental review process is the appropriate vehicle for dealing with potential effects of the airport master plan. The board needs to be vigilant in reviewing those documents and commenting on them in "a correct and scientific manner," he said.

Board chairwoman Helen Baumann said the next step is to comment on the draft environmental impact report, which probably will be released in the middle of next year.

"That's where the rubber meets the road, with comments on the draft EIR," she said.

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