

High-Powered Rally Lays Out Fight Against FAA Rerouting Plan

By Anne W. Semmes

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GREENWICH Energized citizenry and elected officials gathered in Greenwich's Town Hall Monday night were palpable in their spoken witness to challenge the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) right to negatively affect their quality of life with the rerouting and increase of air travel.

They came from Washington, D.C., from Hartford, from cities and towns across southwestern Connecticut and adjoining areas in New York and included impassioned speakers U.S. Rep. Christopher Shays, R-4, and state Sen. John McKinney, R-Fairfield; letters read from U.S. Sens. Joseph Lieberman and Christopher Dodd, and the final witness of state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal. All are determined to stop the FAA's planned January 2009 rerouting that will bring an alleged doubling of low-air approaches to New York airports, doubling of airplane noise and increased air pollution over Westchester and Fairfield counties.

Those affected by the FAA rerouting plan called the Integrated Airspace Alternative (IAA) an effort to address increased traffic into the New York airports, extend across New Jersey to Philadelphia.

Glaringly absent from the meeting were representatives from FAA. "The FAA has not responded to tonight's invitation," said the evening's moderator, former New Canaan First Selectman Judy Neville, now chief operating officer of the Alliance for Sensible Airspace Planning. The alliance was formed by leaders of Fairfield County

cities and towns, including Norwalk, to fight the FAA. Neville introduced Shays, the first speaker, as "always there for us and he is with us now."

"Judy was speaking about this before anyone was," said Shays. "She knows its impact would be tremendous. This is a knockdown, drag-out fight and there's nothing pretty about it. "This is a legislative and a legal undertaking," he said, referring to the lawsuit the Alliance has brought against the FAA's plan.

Shays told of an earlier clash with the FAA 10 years ago when planes were rerouted "to Runway 22" and flying low over his 4th Congressional District due to an equipment breakdown at La Guardia. After getting no response from the FAA, Shays appealed to then-U.S. Sen. Alfonso D'Amato of New York, who chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee, with power over the FAA. "He solved the problem in 15 minutes," said Shays. Calling the new rerouting plan similar, he said, "The problem now is we don't have (D'Amato) there anymore."

He called the FAA "isolated from any public pressure as it is all about public safety and efficiency and promoting air traffic. We need the FAA to have an obligation for quality-of-life issues."

Shays had asked the Government Accountability Office to look at market tools to address the increased air traffic problems." To eliminate cueing, he said, "Maybe at peak time you charge twice as much and at non-peak time the cost is a third less."

"It's only going to get worse," he said. By 2015, the current 650 million air passengers are expected to increase to 1 billion.

Shays recommended setting up a watch group in each town currently being affected to monitor complaints, to meet perhaps bimonthly.

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"Representatives of these groups could meet with larger groups," he said.

Whether or not Greenwich was affected (few Greenwich residents were present) as much as other towns such as New Canaan and Fairfield, he said, "we need to come together."

The only factors keeping Westchester Airport from becoming the fourth regional airport, he said, were the "tall trees of the Convent of the Sacred Heart" on King Street as well those living on King Street.

Dodd, in his letter read to the group, cited that "New York's three airports ranked as the top three with delayed operations nationwide. Dodd recently joined with New Jersey Sen. Frank Lautenberg's blocking of the nomination of the new FAA Administration Robert Sturgell on account of "his silence on ensuring a more transparent airspace redesign process over greater New York."

Offering an optimistic note was McKinney, the state Senate Minority Leader, who cited the recent defeat of the Broadwater proposal a plan to build a mammoth natural gas terminal in Long Island Sound (LIS), "because Connecticut cities and New York citizens and public servants were energized. They put all the facts together because it was bad for the environment."

"The only way we can do this," said McKinney, "is if we are organized and work together and speak about the facts. We will get the FAA to do what is right."

State Sen. Bob Duff, who represents Norwalk, shared McKinney's optimism. "We can sink this terrible plan," he said. "If we all work together, victory will be ours." It was Neville's sleuthing of FAA flight information that brought out the tracking facts there are some 160 to 260 flights daily over the southern

area of Connecticut, with the majority flying under 4,000 feet. The new rerouting plan would bring 300 to 400 additional flights. That translates, she said, into "over 500 planes a day over our communities."

The FAA had stated it would "try to keep flights coming into La Guardia at 3,000 feet or above," she said, which was also of concern for being "too low."

Neville spoke of three plane tracking information sites the Alliance has on its Web site at www.sensibleairspace.org.

Shays added to his idea of watch groups that plane trackers could be trained, be deputized, "to confront the FAA with people's knowledge."

Blumenthal, arriving late, brought before the crowd the full impact of the recent win against Broadwater. "No one thought we could win," he said. "Just me against them." Here again, he said, "It looks like the little guys against the big guys after all, we're against the feds. The arguments are very similar." And again, "There are better alternatives to this flight plan and it's the FAA's place to consider them," including as in the Broadwater plan, the environmental impact.

And as the Broadwater plan would take over state land (LIS), Blumenthal said, "the IAA plan impinges on the rights of Connecticut as it takes on parkland and other public trust land that we have a right to protect."

He cited the wide representative support behind the Alliance lawsuit, which included 12 groups from five states: Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey and New York. His brief for the case had an index "767 pages long."

"We are in this fight for the long haul," he said. "The state of Connecticut is absolutely determined and

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resolved to see this fight through." Anne W. Semmes is a reporter for sister paper the Greenwich Citizen.

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