

Guest Column
Stu News Newport August 11, 2020

Newport Beach Urges County to Include Long-Term Protections With General Aviation Project Leases

By Newport Beach City Council Members Jeff Herdman and Diane B. Dixon

A recent letter to the editor about John Wayne Airport's General Aviation Improvement Program (GAIP) contained incorrect information about the City of Newport Beach's response to the County's future plans for the airport. The City, local aviation-focused community groups and neighboring communities have taken extraordinary steps and spent countless hours working to protect our neighborhoods from any additional noise and air quality impacts caused by John Wayne Airport's operations. Here are the correct facts.

The City has closely tracked the GAIP since April 2017, when the County of Orange first initiated the required environmental review for updating its general aviation (GA) facilities. When the draft environmental impact report was released for public review in September 2018, we were immediately and justifiably concerned. The proposed project and most of the alternatives went far beyond updating facilities and would have surely led to an eventual increase in general aviation jet traffic over Newport Beach and other cities.

Those who have been with us in the trenches know the past 23 months have been filled with highs and lows, long meetings and late nights. But the time was well spent: The project the County is now going to build is much better for our community than what was originally proposed. Newport Beach did not get everything we asked for, but the Board of Supervisors heard and directly responded to a number of our concerns about the project. In fact, the Board-approved project contains two elements critical to restricting the growth of GA jet operations at the airport.

Specifically, the adopted plan allows just two fixed base operators (FBOs) - the airport wanted three - and the Board set aside more than 34 acres, the majority of the space available, for the smaller and quieter GA aircraft. This, in turn, reduces the space available for GA jets and there will be fewer GA jets parked at John Wayne Airport when this project is completed than there are today.

There's still work to be done. The City is now focused on how the FBOs will manage their facilities. We are urging the County to limit the amenities the FBOs offer and the hours they operate as we believe this will help prevent an increase in GA jet traffic and a corresponding increase in overflight noise and pollution. We firmly believe such restrictions should be included in the leases between the County and the FBOs.

Accordingly, the City is asking the Board to:

- Limit the hours of operation of the FBOs to match the commercial airline curfew hours;
- Eliminate the general aviation facility (the proposed space that would be used to process international passengers);
- Prohibit commercial airlines, such as JetSuiteX, from operating out of an FBO facility;
- Ensure the land use restrictions (already approved by the Board) are included in the long-term FBO leases.

It's important to remember that the County of Orange owns John Wayne Airport and has complete control over its operations. Every airport-related protection Newport Beach has today is the result of negotiations based on strong, fact-based arguments, our community coming together around a shared set of facts and principles, and the County's willingness to hear and respond to Newport Beach's concerns. Anything short of that diminishes our chances of getting and maintaining the protections essential to our quality of life.

Should you wish to learn more about the GAIP and the City's position, please visit newportbeachca.gov/gaip.

Herdman and Dixon serve Chair and Co-Chair, respectively, of the City's Aviation Committee.