

Santa Monica wants to get rid of its municipal airport

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by [Randy Bright](#)



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It's not just churches, non-profits and the poor that are getting the squeeze by local governments in an effort to get more land into the hands of private citizens and corporations as a means of expanding their tax base. Now airports are increasingly being targeted for closure.

Santa Monica, California, has been aggressively attempting to force its airport, Santa Monica Municipal Airport (KSMO) to close for years. On October 31, 2013, it filed a lawsuit with the US District Court for the Central District of California against the FAA to force it to convey clear title to the airport property back to the City of Santa Monica.

KSMO became an airport in the early 1920s when Douglas Aircraft Company located there. At that time, there were few homes near the airport, except for those Douglas built for its employees. Its 4,973×150-foot runway is now surrounded by hangars and homes.

During World War II, the airport was expanded and improved with the assistance of the federal government when Douglas produced thousands of airplanes at the site. After the war ended, on August 10, 1948, the land was conveyed back to the city under an “instrument of transfer.” The federal government claims that that instrument obligated the city to operate the airport “in perpetuity.” Failure to do so would call for forfeiture of the airport back to the federal government.

However, the city disputes this claim. Their position is that the city never relinquished title of the land during the war – even though the federal government built the runway, control tower and other infrastructure under a lease.

The city claims that the suit it has filed is due to complaints by local residents about noise and fumes from aircraft.

In 2011, in response to an earlier suit that Santa Monica filed, the US Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia denied its petition as “arbitrary and capricious” to review a decision by the FAA that prohibited the city from banning jet traffic from the airport.

In that instance, the city had attempted to create an ordinance that would ban certain categories of business jets, but the FAA claimed that the city did not possess the authority to enforce such an ordinance.

The court stated that airports that accept federal funding have a legal obligation to keep the airport operational with “fair and reasonable terms and without unjust discrimination, to all types, kinds, and classes of aeronautical uses”.

The AOPA (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association) has been fighting to keep KSMO open for several years, not just because of its contractual obligations to do so, but because of its importance to the community. According to the AOPA, it provides revenues to the city as well as jobs, estimating its contribution at over \$200 million annually.

Santa Monica is not the only airport to face pressure to close. St. Clair, Missouri, attempted to close its airport several years ago. It also was obligated to keep its airport open because of its contract with and funding from the federal government.

What is the real motivation for the Santa Monica closure? The city claims it is due to complaints from local residents, but virtually all of them located to the area after the airport came into existence.

But others are claiming that it is coming from developers who want the land for dense development, or that local government wants to develop the property into a park. One blogger wrote, “I hope the residents of SM are not gullible enough to think they’ll get a park if it closes.”

Unfortunately, as cities create urban growth boundaries and shortages of land occur, airports are targeted, deceptively, as a waste of land resources. The most infamous airport land-grab example is that of Meigs Field in Chicago, whose runways were bulldozed in the middle of the night by then Mayor Daley.

Airports are important to communities, as much as roads and bridges. They contribute greatly to the health, safety and welfare of the cities they serve by bringing business and jobs in addition to revenues from operations, as well as cargo and humanitarian flights.

I will sum it up with the words of another blogger who wrote, “As a volunteer, I flew rescue workers and critical supplies into the Northridge area (Van Nuys airport) after the quake 20 years ago. That little piece of runway in Santa Monica will be precious when it’s their turn for disaster. This is all about getting more taxes and favoring certain developers. There are no “new” places for airports in the area. Airports are an asset to a community and everyone (businesses, flyers, etc.) needs to start a campaign to recall those folks.”

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