The battle between Santa Monica and the airport rages

February 9, 2017 Randy Bright

The City of Santa Monica and the Federal Aviation Administration reached an agreement this week to close the Santa Monica airport by the end of the year 2028. The agreement allows the city to immediately shorten its runway from about 5,000 feet to just 3,500 feet, effectively prohibiting most all jet traffic from using the airport. In comparison to Tulsa, this would be like us losing Riverside Airport, which would be devastating to business.

The agreement has already affected one new business, JetSuiteX, which would have provided low cost airline service out of the airport. It began service in December.

Apparently not all of the terms of the agreement have been made public yet, but one report indicated that the city could not use the property for any other use than park, educational or cultural purposes without a public vote.

This is just one of a long list of government overreach examples is the long battle the City of Santa Monica has waged against its own airport in an attempt to close it down for development, even though it is apparent that the citizens of Santa Monica want the airport kept open.

In December of 2015, the FAA held that because of federal funding, the airport must remain open at least until the end of August 2023. Staying true to form, the city would not take no for an answer, filing an appeal with the FAA to overturn its own ruling.

About a year ago, an article was posted with the LA Times regarding accusations by an aviation business and organization group saying that the city was "imposing illegal landing fees, diverting airport funds to nonaviation uses and setting unfair leasing policies to force out aeronautical tenants"

The group filed a complaint with the FAA alleging that the city had "pursued plans for years to make it increasingly difficult for aviation businesses, pilots and aircraft owners to operate at the famous airport that was once home to Douglas Aircraft Co."

The complaint contends that the city had violated FAA regulations, the terms of the 1948 agreement that transferred ownership of the airport to the city from the federal government, and terms of its agreements with the federal government regarding grants it received for airport improvements.

The complaints also accused the city of imposing "excessive and unreasonable" landing fees, as well as other "impermissible charges for airport expenses and other inadequately documented

costs", and for improperly charging interest on loans, even charging interest extending six years before the loans were made.

According to the article in the LA Times, the City of Santa Monica refused to give aviation businesses long-term leases, but had given long-term leases and lower rental rates to other businesses that were not aviation related. Another report indicated that it had issued eviction notices to two private operations at the airport, but FAA intervention stopped them.

The City of Santa Monica began its efforts to close the airport in 2010 by banning Category C and D aircraft (which include business jets). The FAA ruled that they had no authority to impose the ban, so the City Council took them to court – all the way to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia – losing all the way. In 2011, the court ruled that they could not ban certain categories of aircraft.

The City Council then filed a lawsuit against the FAA in 2013, asking the court to give them free title to the airport so they could close it, claiming that the closure was necessary to respond to complaints by residents about noise. However, a survey done by the AOPA (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association) indicated that most of the complaints came from people who were not Santa Monica residents, and that 70 percent of those surveyed wanted the airport to remain open.

Studies have shown that the airport supports over 1,500 jobs and businesses, and generates about \$250 million in economic activity each year. More than 275 aircraft are stationed at the 227 acre-airport.

The area around the airport is heavily developed so any large undeveloped land mass becomes a target for takeover. Airports are particularly counter to the current urban planning mentality of dense development for tax purposes, especially if the airport discourages high-rise development.

AOPA is still committed to saving the airport and will continue its fight to keep it open. FAA Administrator Michael Huerta has expressed his desire for Santa Monica to keep it open as well, stating, "there's also a period of time for the industry, for the city, and the aviation community in Southern California to perhaps think about alternatives that might be out there as well," indicating that the twelve-year period before should be used to find a way to keep the airport and peacefully coexist with the city.



Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-582-3972, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net. ©2017 Randy W. Bright