

SAN DIEGO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AT LINDBERGH FIELD

Local Government, Including the San Diego Unified Port District, Can Improve Efforts to Reduce the Noise Impact Area and Address Public Dissatisfaction

REPORT NUMBER 2000-126, OCTOBER 2000

Audit Highlights . . .

Our review found that:

- Delays in implementing sound-attenuation programs, combined with the city of San Diego's (city) failure to implement certain provisions of a land-use plan, have prevented further decreases in incompatible land use within the San Diego International Airport at Lindbergh Field's noise-impact area.***
 - The cessation of public meetings by the county of San Diego's Noise Control Hearing Board may have lessened the community's trust of the port district.***
 - There have been numerous studies about relocating the airport, but thus far, there has been no final decision to move or expand it.***
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The Joint Legislative Audit Committee requested that we examine the accuracy of the noise-monitoring data that the San Diego Unified Port District (port district) reports to the Department of Transportation (Caltrans). We were also asked to evaluate the San Diego International Airport at Lindbergh Field's (Lindbergh Field) noise-monitoring and flight-tracking system and the port district's use of that system to respond to complaints. Finally, we were asked to determine the extent to which Caltrans monitors the port district's noise complaint process. We found that state regulations limit Caltrans' role to ensuring that the port district's noise-monitoring system meets state standards, and to reviewing quarterly noise-monitoring data for the purpose of assessing progress towards reducing Lindbergh Field's noise-impact area. Numerous entities have a role in planning, monitoring, or overseeing the noise impact area. We found that:

Finding #1: Implementation of sound-attenuation programs has been slow.

Although the port district has funded improvements to school districts within the San Diego Unified School District, delays in the startup of its residential and military sound attenuation programs have slowed its ability to further reduce Lindbergh Field's impact area. The port district intended to begin upgrading eligible homes in its residential sound-attenuation program in 1999, but was delayed when the city of San Diego's Historical Resources Board voiced concerns about the preservation of homes within the noise-impact area. The port district expects more than 200 residences to receive upgrades by January 2002. However, the port district has made little progress toward implementing its military sound-attenuation program, which is similar to the residential program. In 1999 the port district began working on a potential exchange of property with the U.S. Marine Corps. If the property exchange

is approved, the port district could begin addressing some of the noise issues at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot within two to three years.

We recommended that the port district continue negotiations with the U.S. Marine Corps to resolve noise-related issues at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

The district reports that it has negotiated an agreement with the U.S. Marine Corps that will provide additional acreage to extend the airport's north taxiway. The agreement also includes the construction of a 25-foot high sound wall to attenuate the effects of the taxiway extension and other related airport ground based noise sources on the depot.

Finding #2: The port district discontinued reporting certain data despite a provision in its current variance to do so.

In 1972 San Diego County (county) declared Lindbergh Field a "noise problem airport" in accordance with state regulations. The port district applied to Caltrans for a variance to the noise standards. In accordance with the requirements of the most recent variance, the port district must include in its quarterly reports information such as a report of operations by airline, aircraft type, and stage classification for each quarter and cumulative period ending June 30 and December 31. This data allows interested parties to track the number of aircraft considered to be excessively noisy. In 1999 the port district stopped reporting on operations by airline and aircraft type.

We recommended that the port district continue to report on operations by airline and aircraft type, as the variance requires.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

The district states that information on operations by airline and aircraft type for January 1 through March 31, 2000, has been provided to Caltrans, the county, and when requested, to community members. Further, it states that it continues to include this information in its quarterly noise reports to the county and Caltrans.

Finding #3: The county is not properly monitoring the port district's progress.

State law requires the county to enforce the noise regulations established by Caltrans. The county established its Noise Control Hearing Board (noise board) to enforce the terms and conditions of Lindbergh Field's variance to the noise standards and submit quarterly reports to Caltrans based on information provided by the port district. The noise board also reviews and audits the port district's noise-monitoring data and serves as a forum for public discussion of airport noise issues.

The noise board has not met since April 1999 and, as a result, the port district has been submitting the quarterly reports directly to Caltrans without independent verification. Unless the noise board resumes its oversight responsibilities, there is no independent, local governing body to ensure that the port district is meeting the terms and conditions of Lindbergh Field's variance and that progress toward reducing the noise impact area is acceptable. Moreover, community members affected by Lindbergh Field's noise no longer have an independent verification of the port district's noise-monitoring data.

We recommended that the county reactivate its noise board. It should also ensure that the noise board meets quarterly and submits regular and complete reports to Caltrans.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

The county reports that it has increased its efforts to ensure that the noise board will maintain a regular meeting schedule to review quarterly reports from the port district about the operation of Lindbergh Field. The noise board met in January, April, and December of 2001 to clear the backlog of quarterly reports through the first two quarters of 2001.

Finding #4: The city of San Diego (city) has failed to enforce certain provisions of Lindbergh Field's comprehensive land-use plan.

The comprehensive land-use plan that the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) adopted in February 1992, with a subsequent amendment in April 1994, directs the city to prohibit the development of any further incompatible land uses within the area surrounding Lindbergh Field and to require new projects to be consistent with the plan. In certain instances, property owners

must file an avigation easement with the county recorder and the port district to obtain building permits. Avigation easements are one way of converting land use from incompatible to compatible. However, the city has not consistently obtained avigation easements when required. In fact, it was not until October 2, 2000, that the city council amended an ordinance to include supplemental regulations for Lindbergh Field's land-use plan and update its avigation easement requirements. The ordinance still requires the approval of the Coastal Commission, which oversees local coastal programs.

We recommended that the city should develop procedures to ensure that property owners obtain the necessary avigation easements for new developments within the noise-impact area. It should also make certain that its general and community plans, zoning, and regulations and ordinances are consistent with the comprehensive land-use plan.

City Action: Corrective action taken.

The city reports that its ordinance became effective November 1, 2000, for areas outside of the coastal zone. However, the city did not inform us if it received approval from the Coastal Commission to implement its ordinance for areas within the coastal zone.

The city reports that a process is in place to ensure that staff direct applicants proposing new developments within the noise-impact area to the port district to grant the avigation easement. Also, its staff review environmental documents for certain development projects to ensure that there is a requirement for granting an avigation easement to the port district when an increase in the number of dwelling units or an increase in the noise above a certain level occurs.

Finding #5: SANDAG did not ensure that all the city's regulations were consistent with the comprehensive land-use plan.

SANDAG also bears some responsibility for ensuring that certain provisions of the land-use plan are met. Specifically, the plan requires SANDAG to monitor the city's general and community plans, zoning ordinances, and building regulations. Five years after the adoption of the plan, port district staff recognized the omission of Lindbergh Field from the city's ordinance. Although the omission eventually was corrected, SANDAG's failure to ensure that all the

city's regulations were consistent with the plan before 1997 contributed to the city's delays in seeking the necessary aviation easements to reduce incompatible land developments.

We recommended that SANDAG comply with the plan requirements for ensuring that the city's general plan and ordinances agree with the comprehensive land-use plan.

SANDAG Action: Pending.

The SANDAG reports that in October 2001 the governor signed AB 93, which creates the San Diego Regional Airport Authority. The regional authority became effective January 1, 2002, and is responsible for the Land Use Commission and planning and siting a new regional airport. The SANDAG reports that it will cooperate with the regional authority to transfer its responsibilities and planning program.

Finding #6: The port district can improve its community relations.

The public can register complaints through a hotline established by the port district's Airport Noise Management Office. Another forum for residents to voice their concerns is the Airport Noise Advisory Committee (committee), established by the port district in 1981 and composed of 14 voting members from various agencies, industries, and other interested groups. The committee meets at least once each calendar quarter. Any community members wishing to address the committee must do so within a time limit of three minutes.

At the committee's September 14, 2000, meeting, emotions ran high and involved outbursts that were not conducive to rational discussion. The existing format, similar to that of a public meeting, did not appear to generate constructive communication between the port district and the public.

We recommended that the port district encourage more community involvement, such as using working groups that include local citizen representation.

District Action: Corrective action taken.

The port district reports that the Airport Noise Advisory Committee has incorporated a structure that, where appropriate, will include small group forums as an additional communication vehicle to enhance its community outreach program.

Finding #7: The port district can do more to encourage voluntary restrictions of noisier retrofitted stage 3 aircraft.

Significant noise differences exist among the aircraft that comply with stage 3 noise levels. New stage 3 aircraft, such as Boeing 757s, are much quieter than older Boeing 727s with “hushkits,” which reduce aircraft engine fan and compression noise through engine modification, acoustic treatment, and noise-suppression technology. The Federal Aviation Administration’s position is that hushkit modification is an appropriate method to comply with stage 3 aircraft noise standards. The port district is not able to restrict the access of hushkitted aircraft from Lindbergh Field. However, the Airport Noise Capacity Act of 1990 does allow the port district to seek the air carriers’ concurrence to implement voluntary restrictions. In response to a request from the committee, the port district plans to send a letter to aircraft operators urging them to voluntarily substitute noisier hushkit stage 3 planes with quieter stage 3 planes.

We recommended that the port district proactively participate in finding ways to reduce or minimize the use of stage 3 certified aircraft at Lindbergh Field.

District Action: Partial corrective action taken.

The port district informs us that it corresponded with a number of aircraft operators to request their voluntary reduction of hushkitted aircraft operations. Some major air carriers have ceased or limited the use of these aircraft. The district states that it will continue to proactively research ways to reduce or minimize the use of hushkitted aircraft at Lindbergh Field.

Finding #8: Despite projected increases in aircraft operation, no conclusion has been reached concerning the relocation of Lindbergh Field.

In 1996 aircraft operations at Lindbergh Field totaled 220,000 arrivals and departures. Total aircraft operations at Lindbergh Field are projected to grow at an average annual rate of 2 percent through 2020. At this rate, Lindbergh Field will reach its maximum airport capacity of 275,000 by 2011.

SANDAG, in its role as the regional transportation planning agency, is primarily responsible for siting San Diego’s commercial airport. SANDAG, community groups, and private individuals have conducted about 30 studies concerning the relocation of Lindbergh Field but have not reached any conclusion.

We recommended that SANDAG, local agencies, and citizen's groups effectively address the anticipated growth in Lindbergh Field's aircraft operations by deciding whether to relocate the airport.

SANDAG Action: Pending.

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