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Revved up over flight noise

El Dorado protests plan to deem capital a port of entry, fears more Mather traffic.

By Cathy Locke -- Bee Staff Writer

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El Dorado County leaders took exception to a proposal to designate Sacramento as a customs port of entry, saying they fear it could lead to increased air traffic at Mather Airport.

The Board of Supervisors voted Nov. 1 to send a letter to the federal Bureau of Customs and Border Protection opposing the move unless concerns about noise from cargo planes flying over El Dorado Hills are addressed.

Several supervisors said they were unclear about the intent and ramifications of designating Sacramento a port of entry - a place where customs officials are stationed to check people and foreign goods entering the country. They said they were upset that Sacramento County airport officials failed to inform them of the proposal. The matter came to the board's attention in the final days of the public comment period.

Supervisor Jack Sweeney said the board shouldn't be in a position "where we take action to oppose something because no one has explained it to us."

Cheryl Marcell, deputy director of marketing and public relations for the Sacramento County Airport System, said in an interview that the designation would affect fees, not the number of flights.

If Sacramento is declared a port of entry, she said, the federal government would assume the cost for customs inspections for passengers and cargo arriving on international flights. Although customs inspectors have been assigned to Sacramento International Airport since 2002, Marcell said the airport has paid about \$500,000 a year for their services.

"We think that's the federal government's responsibility," she said, adding that the costs have been spread among air carriers using the airport.

Mather Airport has no regularly scheduled international cargo flights, Marcell said, and designating Sacramento a port of entry should not affect the number of flights or noise.

Supervisor Rusty Dupray, however, said Folsom and Elk Grove city officials also had expressed concerns about the designation, viewing it as an attempt to draw more business to Mather Airport.

He urged the board to approve a letter, saying, "The whole idea is to send a message that we don't want an increase of air traffic into Mather without them addressing the issues of noise or flight patterns."

Airport spokeswoman Gina Swankie said that of an average 265 daily flight operations at Mather, about 12 are cargo flights. The remainder involve general aviation or military aircraft.

Folsom and El Dorado County residents who have battled with Sacramento County over noise caused by low-flying cargo planes urged the board to pursue the port-of-entry matter.

"I disagree that it won't increase flights," Folsom resident Bill Bryant said, arguing that having customs inspectors readily available would encourage more international business.

Sacramento County airport officials "are going around our backs," Bryant said. "They need to sit down and talk with us."

Supervisor Charlie Paine noted that he had worked for the Port of Sacramento and Mather Airport. The port-of-entry designation is key to improving efficiency at the facilities, he said.

Shingle Springs resident Art Marinaccio also urged the board to proceed cautiously in opposing the designation, citing the importance of Sacramento airports to the regional economy.

"If you think Mather could not be completely shut down as an air facility, you're mistaken," he said.

Supervisor Sweeney agreed that a regional air cargo facility is important, but he said Sacramento County needs to involve other counties and cities affected by airport operations.

"This is a regional issue that regional neighbors should discuss together," he said.

Because El Dorado County wasn't invited to participate, he said, "We have to sit outside the door and throw paper airplanes to get attention."

Paine said the county should find other ways to make its voice heard. He suggested setting up a workshop with Sacramento and Folsom officials.

"All we're asking is to be a player," he said.

About the writer:

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