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Boost in Mather flights expected

Folsom, El Dorado Hills to feel the heat as air traffic is predicted to double.

By Loretta Kalb -- Bee Staff Writer

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For many residents of Folsom and El Dorado Hills, the flight path of thousands of cargo planes arriving at Mather Airport each year has been a longtime nuisance.

So when Folsom City Councilman Steve Miklos warned Elk Grove Councilman James Cooper that the number of flights at Mather is expected to increase and that Elk Grove residents will be the next to suffer, the councilman listened.

On Jan. 11, Cooper asked city staff members in Elk Grove to explore the potential of intrusive departures from Mather Airport, site of a projected 87,700 combined takeoffs and landings this year. Up to 20,000 are expected to be cargo flights.

But interviews with county airport officials and a review of Mather data show that Elk Grove residents should have little to fear from increased overflights.

Elk Grove's terrain, its distance from Mather Airport and the predominant flight paths of departing planes result in far fewer Elk Grove overflights from Mather than for El Dorado Hills and Folsom.

Folsom and El Dorado Hills are near a main approach path for air traffic, including cargo-carrying Boeing 767s and Airbus A320s.

Regarding departures, by contrast, most pilots turn tightly south and then east, bypassing Elk Grove, according to Sacramento County Airport System maps.

Pilots who do fly over Elk Grove are above 4,000 feet by the time they reach the city, airport data shows. An exception is the northeast corner of the city, where aircraft drop as low as 3,000 feet. At 4,000 feet the noise is comparable to the sound of a car engine 50 feet away, said Monica Newhouse, Sacramento County's airport noise program manager.

But Miklos expects overflights to be a huge problem in the future and has taken the lead on behalf of Folsom and El Dorado residents in fighting the county.

Miklos also warned in a Jan. 18 interview that overflight problems will worsen if Sacramento County is declared an international port of entry by U.S. Customs and Border Protection because Mather needs to increase revenue and may seek more international cargo business.

The need for money, Miklos said, also will push the county to increase business after it lengthens the shorter of its two Mather runways to 7,200 from the current 6,000 feet.

"If you go on the basis of flight tracks (county flight path data) ... any reasonable individual can see what's currently coming over," he said. "They (county officials) are talking a two-to three-times increase (in flights).

"It only stands to reason that they have to adjust takeoff patterns, and the only place they can increase their takeoff patterns is over Elk Grove."

Rob Leonard, chief operating officer of the Sacramento County Airport System, differs on most

points Miklos makes. He agrees, however, that Mather Airport did lose money in each of the past three years, the result of the U.S. Postal Service ending operations there in 2001.

The Mather losses, offset by revenues from other county airports, were \$1.6 million in fiscal year 2004 and nearly \$500,000 through last June 30. But Mather, aided by new leases, is likely to break even in 2006, Leonard said.

He said the runway extension in the draft master plan will give the largest aircraft a backup runway when the longer, 11,300-foot runway is temporarily unavailable. And the port-of-entry designation, Leonard said, will end the county's \$500,000-a-year payments for customs services. Instead, the federal government will pick up the customs tab.

The Mather Airport draft master plan, meanwhile, does show an increase in cargo traffic. But Leonard said the increase is not likely to be noticed in Elk Grove, which is little affected by departing air traffic.

"They will be flying the same tracks they do now," Leonard said. "The low-altitude, high-power settings, when they really are making noise, those are north of Elk Grove."

Air cargo traffic is projected to nearly double over the next 15 years, to about 35,000 combined landings and departures a year. But little or no increase is projected for military and air taxi flights. Overall, air operations are expected to rise 35 percent, to a high of 118,900 combined departures and landings in 2021.

The greatest effects will be felt in El Dorado Hills and Folsom, where elevations average 765 and 218 feet above sea level, respectively, putting the communities closer to descending aircraft. County officials say they are working with air carriers to mitigate the traffic.

United Parcel Service pilots are practicing what is known as "continuous descent approaches" to reduce noise, Newhouse said.

That means pilots descend gradually, engines at idle, without the traditional leveling off. They do not lower wheels or deploy flaps until they are within five miles of the airport, cutting noise measurably, Newhouse said. She said Mather is expected to be the first airport nationally to fully implement the landing strategy.

Leonard noted, meanwhile, that the airport draft master plan is entering the environmental assessment phase. Ultimately, it must be approved by the Sacramento Area Council of Governments.

"There is going to be a lot of technical work and public dialogue about the specific nature of and the future of Mather," SACOG Executive Director Mike McKeever said. "That is still coming. "So the people who have concerns ... will have a venue to get them addressed."

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