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Mather growth plans incite mayor

By: *Matthew Self, The Telegraph*

A marketing strategy seeking to increase cargo carriers at Mather Airport has affected Folsom homeowners crying foul and the mayor discussing possible legal action.

Officials at Rancho Cordova-based Mather, which currently houses cargo operators UPS and a handful of smaller carriers, have long coveted cargo giant FedEx. In recent months it has targeted expanding Asian cargo operators in hopes of getting a large piece of the California cargo pie.

Mather Airport spokesman Monica Newhouse said the county has given the Sacramento County Airport System a mandate to make the operation a self-sustaining one. Because of this, she said, it should surprise no one that Mather officials intend to increase operations.

"We have been tasked with operating Mather Airport as a cargo airport. Until that changes, we have to operate that as best we can. The airport needs to be self-sufficient," she said.

News of the operation expansion has inspired outrage from long-time Mather opponents in Folsom who say the noise caused by low landing patterns of the large cargo planes are an environmental hazard.

In their point of view, the expansion is just further proof their "bad neighbors" to the west are ignoring them.

"The SCAS is very good at dancing around the problem of air cargo jet noise. They either do not directly answer the questions asked or hide behind their 'federal, state and local laws, rules, and regulations' shield," Folsom homeowner Michael A. Coffman wrote in an e-mail to the Telegraph.

Mather, a former Air Force base, has been a fixture in the eastern portion of greater Sacramento for decades. When the Air Force closed the base in 1988, the displacement of 7,600 military personnel created a financial black hole for the area. Sacramento County officials did not waste time announcing their intention for a public/private venture.

It opened as a public cargo strip in 1995 and diverted some cargo operations from the growing Sacramento International Airport. However, the larger planes taking off and landing at low altitudes have become more than a minor nuisance for some, particularly those landing during typical sleeping hours.

On May 18, 2004, Flight UPS956 registered a ground-level noise disturbance exceeding 74 decibels - about 10 decibels short of where hearing loss is expected to begin. According to the American Speech-Language Hearing Association, the noise was equivalent to driving in heavy traffic with the window down.

Of greater concern was its landing time: 4:49 A.M.

Mather's plans have drawn the ire of Folsom Mayor Steve Miklos, who recently advised city staff to begin looking



Large cargo planes often take a landing path below 3,000 feet as they approach Mather Airport. Courtesy Photo

into possible legal action that would block all additional flights or operation expansion. Miklos, who was speaking to an audience during a Joint Powers Authority meeting with El Dorado County commissioners Helen Bowman and Rusty Dupray, received the verbal support of the pair.

The threat came as an extension of an on-going debate between the city and the county over Mather's use, and the county's apparent intention to build new facilities to turn the airport into a regional cargo hub.

Critics of the plan say Mather cannot advance before Folsom residents have their say during a required environmental impact study, but Newhouse says that's not entirely true.

"There's not any proposal that wouldn't see some type of environmental assessment, but saying that, the existing EIR can accommodate a lot of more operations that currently go on there," she said.

She said the airport is within its right to increase the number of flights, although it has no intention of becoming a super-sized operation like those found in Louisville or Memphis. There's not enough demand for the "50 to 100" flights those airports see.

Folsom homeowner Charles Coalson disagreed with Newhouse's legal assessment.

"Extending the (landing system) out three times further than standard ILS systems or replacing the ILS equipment with equipment that can be expanded and up graded to CAT III levels, or adding DME equipment, or installing conduit for runway lighting and displacing the burrowing owls, or installing RADAR in the control tower at Mather, or changing time arrivals and departures for cargo operations or arrival and departure paths in and out of Mather should be enough to kick in environmental assessments," Coalson wrote in an e-mail to the Telegraph.

Another criticism of Mather is its drain on the SCAS funds. User fees collected for use at Sacramento International have been diverted to support Mather for nearly 10 years.

SCAS COO Rob Leonard said Mather showed a \$242,000 operating loss for the first six months of Fiscal Year 2005, against expenditures of \$1.945 million. He said he would expect to see similar numbers continuing in the near future.

"That's pretty reflective (of the Mather operation). Recent studies state it's a 'smooth operation.' There are no spikes in expense or revenues," Leonard said. He added the numbers do not reflect any state or federal grants because those typically go to a capital improvement fund.

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