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Airport turbulence

by ANTHONY GENTILE

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Federal aviation and local airport officials attempted a soft landing last week as they took the stick on public concerns about San Diego International Airport's possible use of a 250-degree departure heading that could generate a "slight increase" in jet noise over south Point Loma.

The new heading, which might send some takeoffs directly over Dana middle, Silvergate elementary and Warren Walker schools, is being considered during construction of a new taxiway funded by federal economic stimulus money.

Representatives from the San Diego County Regional Airport Authority and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) addressed concerns at length during an Aug. 20 Peninsula Community Planning Board (PCPB) meeting.

Members of the PCPB's Airport Committee have been among those voicing concern.

"One of the things that the Peninsula Community Planning Board committee was concerned about was that the airport did not provide us proper notice regarding the use of the 250-degree heading that they will have on a temporary basis, which is south of the normal 275-degree heading just for this new taxiway construction," said PCPB Airport Committee chair Suhail Khalil.

The committee has drafted a letter urging that the Airport Authority consider a different method of construction to lessen the need for and impact of the new heading.

George Condon, the Airport Authority's director of airside operations, and David Borcalli, an FAA frontline manager, addressed the PCPB Airport Committee's suggested measures to ease the jet-noise influence during the nine-month construction period.

Regarding suggestions that the concrete ramp near the general aviation facility be used as an alternative path for aircraft to access the north taxiway, Condon said that is not possible because it is already at its maximum use. He said in addition to handling general aviation aircraft, that area also accommodates cargo operations and serves as overnight aircraft parking.

"It's used to its maximum every day," Condon said. "There's nowhere else to relocate them to. That space is not available."

In response to another suggestion that the eastern half of the taxiway be constructed during curfew hours of 11:30 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. to ease jet noise late at night, Condon said it could not be because it is a complete reconstruction process. Although the entire runway at Lindbergh Field was resurfaced during these hours before, Condon said that was simply an overlay and not a rebuilding of the runway.

"We would love to be able to completely reconstruct that runway but we haven't figured out how to do that with one runway yet," Condon said. "So we continue to take off that old top pavement and take off the new top pavement because we're forced to."

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Borcalli addressed the other suggested measures by the PCPB Airport Committee and assured those in attendance that the 250-degree heading would only be used in the case of heavy traffic at Lindbergh Field and not a regular departure heading.

“The 250-degree heading is something we’d like to have in our back pocket in the event we start getting ground delays,” Borcalli said. “Once you push off the gate, we have very little room at the airport. It’s going to be a last resort to get that one airplane 15th in line off the ground an extra minute because we’re going to have arrivals at the same time.”

Both Khalil and community members expressed their concerns that the 250-degree heading would be used on a more regular basis as the airport continues to expand. This expansion will start with the completion of “The Green Build,” which will add 10 new gates by early 2013.

“The 250(-degree) fanning of the departures isn’t going to be a continuous mitigation to our traffic programs on the ground,” Borcalli said. “It doesn’t help us that much. It’s a very small remedy to the ground traffic problems that we’re trying to eliminate.”

Borcalli also clarified during his presentation that the 250-degree heading has always been available for airport use and that it is not something that needs approval from the FAA. He said the airport has chosen not to use it based on a handshake agreement with the surrounding community years ago.

“The airspace is ours to use from an air traffic standpoint. If we need to separate people and get aircraft in an expeditious manner out in the airspace and on the route in a safe manner, that’s what we’re going to do,” Borcalli said. “We’ve never signed anything. We’ve never given away anything for the 250.”

“It’s never been something to give or take,” he said. “It’s always been there. We’ve elected not to use it on a continuous basis because it really doesn’t benefit us that much.”

PCPB’s Airport Committee is holding its next regular monthly meeting on Friday, Aug. 28 from noon to 1:30 p.m. at 2835 Perry Road in Liberty Station. At that meeting, Condon will be on hand to provide a PowerPoint presentation about the taxiway construction.

Khalil said he will present a letter to Sen. Christine Kehoe and Congresswoman Susan Davis that the PCPB approved Aug. 20 regarding the list of suggestions to the Airport Authority.

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