



Helicopter Noise: The People's Perspective – Los Angeles County

By Robert W. Moorman

Homeowner groups in the Los Angeles basin and Long Island could become the template for anti-helicopter noise groups in the U.S. They're well organized and prepared. In this part of our ongoing series on helicopter noise, we look at LA County.

A Tipping Point

Los Angeles, California homeowner Richard Anderson became involved in the drive to reduce helicopter noise in Los Angeles basin during the so-called Carmageddon. A span of the Interstate 405 was to be closed during the weekend of July 15, 2011 to replace part of the Mulholland Bridge. Anderson, who lives one mile from the Bridge, worried how the closure would affect local traffic. Friday night came, the freeway was closed, and the traffic-jam-to-end-all-traffic-jams didn't materialize. Motorists heeded warnings and found alternate routes. Anderson and fellow residents of the Sherman Oaks area in LA County were relieved. Everything was peaceful until 11 pm Friday when newsgathering helicopters

Briles Executive Helishares offers twin engine VFR and IFR VIP helicopter charter, transportation and rental, including this 2002 AW109E Power. (Executive HeliShares photo)

showed up to film the roadwork below. One helicopter hovered so low above Anderson's house that the noise from the blades shook the windows. The helicopter departed finally, but returned at 1 am to gather more footage, and then again at 5 am. Anderson got on the phone to the various TV stations to complain. One station hung up on him. Others, he said, ignored his concerns.

Not long after the incident, a public hearing was held to discuss the growing helicopter noise problem in Los Angeles County. Representatives of several homeowner groups in the county showed up and decided to band together. They formed the Los Angeles Area Helicopter Noise Coalition (LAAHNC), a loose knit group of homeowners associations scattered throughout the county. At 4,083 square miles (10,575 km²), LA County is home to nearly 10 million people.

With Anderson as chairman, the Coalition met several times with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA)

and helicopter operators to find ways to mitigate helicopter noise problems in such areas as Long Beach, which is at the southern edge of the county, Torrance, in the southwestern region of LA and the expansive San Fernando Valley, which is north of the LA basin.

Some of the early meetings were described by participants as heated affairs. However, relations have warmed somewhat. Meeting attendees no longer show up and stare at one another like enemies. They talk and understand each other's concerns and positions. "We're not the nutty neighbors and they aren't the horrible pilots," said Anderson. "Pilots are beginning to understand our needs and we're beginning to understand their limitations."

By the time the second bridge span was replaced over the weekend of September 29, 2012 (Carmageddon II), news organizations were using one pool helicopter to record the work below. Pooling for electronic news gathering (ENG) was also used in the mid-October

2012 towing of the Space Shuttle Endeavor through the streets of LA and for "Jamzilla," the 80-hour road closure in mid-February 2014 for paving of the San Diego 405 freeway.

Several LAAHNC members told Vertiflite that the change was due to their advocacy, as well as increased communications with the helicopter industry and FAA.

Congressional Intervention

Both sides are committed to finding a voluntary resolution to reduce helicopter noise. But time to achieve this goal is limited because of a political solution that took FAA and the industry by surprise.

U.S. Sen. Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Rep. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.) successfully inserted a rider into the \$1.1 trillion federal funding bill earlier this year that compels the FAA to develop mandatory noise-mitigation rules and routes for the Los Angeles area by January 2015 unless a voluntary agreement can be reached.

The rider "requires the Secretary [of Transportation] to begin a regulatory process related to the impact of helicopter use on the quality of life and safety of the Los Angeles County people unless the Secretary can demonstrate significant progress in undertaking the actions required."

However, the Helicopter Noise Rider Language contained in the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2014 (H.R. 3547) doesn't specify what is considered to be significant progress in reducing helicopter noise. Nor does it allow for an extension beyond the initial deadline to develop a voluntary solution.

As of this writing, the parties had four months left to come up with a voluntary tri-party agreement between the LAAHNC, helicopter pilot groups and FAA.

The Coalition would like the agreement to include a commitment by all sides to reduce helicopter noise, a process for working together, voluntary noise abatement practices, and enforcement/adherence policies. An agreement on these areas could form the basis of a substantive agreement that could be enhanced over time.

All parties said they prefer a voluntary approach than a congressional mandate, although Anderson and other members said

they're losing patience. Glenn Martin, FAA's new Regional Administrator for the Western Pacific Region has "gotten very involved" in this effort, said Anderson. Several Coalition members gave high marks to Chuck Street, Executive Director of the Los Angeles Area Helicopter Operators Association (LAAHOA) for listening to homeowners noise concerns and suggestions, and trying to find common ground on which to build an agreement.

"You have to take their concerns seriously," said Street, a former helicopter pilot/traffic reporter with KISS FM radio and KTLA TV in Los Angeles. "You need to listen to them and educate the homeowner on what can be done to reduce noise."

All parties are painfully aware of the Herculean task of creating a voluntary tri-party agreement in the limited time left for an area the size of Los Angeles. During a recent meeting among homeowners and pilots, Clark Desing, manager of the operations support group of the FAA Western Service Area said the "airspace above the Los Angeles basin is the busiest and most complex on the planet!"

Little substantive progress has been made on the numerous suggestions by Coalition members to mitigate helicopter noise. The only consensus, observed Street, is on the development of the non-controversial Outreach Group, which informs pilots of voluntary

policies to increase awareness of noise sensitive areas.

The FAA is under tremendous pressure from Congress to reach a resolution to the helicopter noise problem in the LA region. The agency is charged with facilitating the meetings between "stakeholders" and providing homeowners information on airspace procedures, policies and restrictions. The voluntary noise abatement plan must address six major areas of concern:

1. The Secretary of the Department of Transportation shall evaluate and adjust existing helicopter routes above Los Angeles and make adjustments to such routes if the adjustments would lessen the impacts of residential areas and landmarks;
2. Analyze if helicopters could safely fly at higher altitudes in certain areas above Los Angeles County;
3. Develop and promote best practices for helicopter hovering and newsgathering;
4. Conduct outreach to helicopter pilots to inform them of voluntary policies to increase awareness of noise sensitive events and areas;
5. Work with local stakeholders to develop a more comprehensive noise complaint system; and
6. Continue to participate in collaborative engagement between



US Coast Guard Air Station Los Angeles flies four MH-65C Dolphins, averaging 200 search and rescue cases per year. (U.S. Coast Guard photo by PO3 Cory J. Mendenhall)



The LAPD Air Support Division is the largest municipal airborne law enforcement operation in the world, and has the nation's largest rooftop heliport. (LAPD photo)

community reps and helicopter operators.

The FAA declined to make anyone available for an interview to discuss the helicopter noise problems in the LA basin and elsewhere in the U.S. In fact, FAA is not allowing any interviews on this controversial subject. "The reports and updates we provide to Congress speak for themselves," said an FAA spokesman. In its comprehensive 2013 report, FAA favors a voluntary approach to aircraft noise mitigation because it is more flexible than a congressionally-mandated regulation.

FAA representatives do, however, serve as facilitators and offer clarification on regulations and air traffic procedures. "The FAA people have been very careful not to offer opinions about what we should do," says Street. "Sometimes I think that this must be agony for these FAA people. I am sure that they have opinions but are not allowed to express them. They are there at the meetings to encourage constructive dialogue and clarify."

Industry experts say one way to gauge if a noise abatement plan is working, and being enforced, is to create a data-based noise complaint management system. Robert Grottel, president of PlaneNoise, which created such a software system for the helicopter industry, said he is in discussion with the Professional Helicopter Pilots Association and Street's group in Los Angeles to provide the company's Complaint Box solution for

dealing with helicopter noise.

Grottel's company provides technology noise solutions for all five airports managed by the New York/New Jersey Port Authority as well as other airports. Complaint Box is employed at the Naples Airport on the west coast of Florida, one of the more noise-sensitive communities in the U.S.

Area-Wide Noise

A number of homeowners in Los Angeles County moved many years ago to quiet, outlying neighborhoods to escape the noise and crowds of the city. But things changed. What was once pristine and quiet areas

are now victims of sprawl. Other housing developments – as well as highways, businesses and industrial parks – now surround the homeowners. And with this growth comes increased noise from surface and air transportation vehicles. It is an unintended consequence of growth.

"You can't complain about train noise if your house is two feet from the train track," said David Garfinkle, chair of LAAHNC's Best Practices Working Group, who represents the western part of the San Fernando Valley. "You can't complain about freeway noise if you move into an area that is a half block from a freeway. However, when you move into an area that is fairly quiet, that doesn't have helicopter and fixed-wing noise, and then it happens, you have a legitimate complaint."

Garfinkle is one of several Coalition members who spoke with Vertiflite about their noise concerns throughout the LA basin and in their respective communities.

Garfinkle said some helicopter operators have been attentive to homeowners concerns. But he takes issue with the oft-heard industry and FAA response that helicopters can't fly higher than 2,000 ft (610 m) above ground level (AGL) to mitigate noise levels because it interferes with commercial airline and business aviation traffic. "That is true in certain places, but not so in a good part of the Los Angeles area," Garfinkle maintained. "Just because there is an airport 10 miles [16 km] away doesn't mean there is an



Robinson builds more than 500 helicopters a year in LA County. All test flights are conducted before 4 pm to minimize impact on local neighborhoods. (Robinson photo)

impact on how high a helicopter can fly in your area."

The LAAHNC has come up with a voluntary list of goals for helicopter operations, routes and altitudes. Neither FAA nor the industry had yet to agree on these suggestions.

Garfinkle takes exception to the notion that progress was being made between industry, FAA and the Coalition on reducing helicopter noise prior to the congressional mandate. "This [move toward a] voluntary agreement is the direct result of the congressional action," Garfinkle said. "There was nothing prior to that."

The industry disagrees. In fact, intervention by certain members of Congress could make the situation worse, said some members of the helicopter community. They have been working with homeowners on fly friendly initiatives for some time.

"It would seem that elected officials are always looking for issues that will get them media attention and reinforce the impression that they are 'fighting for their constituents,'" said Street. "I think that the Congressmen have come to the conclusion that there is very little political risk to themselves by beating up on helicopter pilots and operators."

Street added quickly: "This is not to suggest that there isn't a noise problem in specific areas. Our job in the helicopter community is to make the appropriate adjustments in the way we fly and where we fly to help mitigate this problem."

Richard Root, member of the Coalition that represents the Torrance-



This photo was taken May 27 at the Hollywood area "Routes & Altitudes" working group at the conclusion of a meeting that took place at the Burbank tower administration complex. From left to right:

- Karla Borden – FFAST
- Steve May – FAA Western-Pacific Region
- Gerry Hans – LAAHNC
- Bob Anderson – President, LAAHNC
- Chuck Street – Executive Director, LAAHOA
- Faviola Garcia (in front) – FAA Western-Pacific Region
- Clark Desing – Manager, FAA Operations Support Group
- George Abrahams – LAAHNC
- Sherry Avery – FAA, LAX Tower Manager

based Citizens for Quiet Helicopters, suggested helicopters fly a mile (1.6 km) offshore to mitigate noise.

That proposal is a "non starter" with helicopter pilots. "We have been reluctant to provide a 'one distance fits all' helicopters minimum distance from shore," said Street. "That is because each helicopter model has its own unique handling characteristics during an autorotation scenario. Therefore the transitioning distance offshore should be at the discretion of each pilot."

Many L.A. pilots have signed a "Best Practices" agreement that includes the words: "I will operate at a distance offshore that will reduce the noise impact of my aircraft on the residents below but will fly close enough to shore so that I can execute a safe autorotation to land in the event of an engine failure."

Root, who has lived in the Hollywood Riviera neighborhood over 40 years, is two miles west of Torrance Airport and not in line with the runways. Torrance-based Robinson Helicopters test flies all its newly manufactured aircraft around the airport. "Robinson is the cause of most of our helicopter noise," said Root.

Root began a dialogue with CEO Kurt Robinson in 2009 to find a way to mitigate helicopter noise. The homeowner group gave him a copy of its noise testing that showed Robinson's flight's exceeded the Helicopter Association International (HAI) Fly Neighborly noise guidelines, "which at the time we thought was 65 dB max," said Root. HAI's more recent guidelines state that the noise level varies, depending on the ambient noise levels on the ground.

If Robinson's helicopters can't avoid flying over homes, they should fly "at or above 2,000 ft AGL," offered Root. Robinson responded that the company flies its helicopters at or above 900 ft [275 m] AGL to mitigate noise levels, weather permitting. Flying much higher would impact safety, said the company. Communications between the homeowner group and the helicopter manufacturer have been limited of late, said Root.



In May, DHL started early morning helicopter delivery services for several major banking customers in the road-congested downtown Los Angeles area. (DHL photo)



"Baby on Board" indicates to residents that the Children's Hospital Los Angeles is providing a critical role with its helicopter service. Children's has one of many hospital helipads in LA County. (Photo by FlyingBryan, via FlightAware.com)

As to the notion that Robinson has been non-responsive lately to Root's concerns, CEO Robinson said: "Robinson has worked diligently with the community for years and in reality receives very few noise complaints." The company not only proposed various noise mitigation procedures and policies, it has implemented several operating procedures. Here are a few: Normal production flights are between 7 am and 4 pm Monday through Friday. Robinson does not fly production flights at nights or on the weekends. The OEM uses the designated routes agreed upon with the City of Torrance and the FAA, and flies offshore to mitigate noise.

On the broader issue of relations between the Coalition and helicopter operators, Root said: "I would not characterize the entire industry with one broad brush. Most of the ones we've been meeting with are good about listening to our concerns."

Donna Sievers, chair of the Coalition's Routes and Altitude Working Group, is a member of the Bluff Heights Association, one of five homeowner groups in Long Beach. Sievers also heads the Pilot Outreach Program for the LAAHNC. Asked if her dealings with helicopter operators have been helpful or not, she said: "I have had both experiences. But it is a slow process. Some pilots have been helpful."

Sievers agreed with other LA homeowner representatives about the

lack of progress on limiting helicopter noise throughout the LA basin. "We can all say we are making progress. But the noise levels have not changed substantially" in the Long Beach area, she said.

Sievers is conflicted about the choice of a voluntary noise abatement plan or a congressionally-mandated FAA regulation. "There is the dilemma of the voluntary process," she said. "How will they the helicopter operators and pilots police themselves?"

In Long Beach, most of the helicopters fly up and down Redondo Avenue toward and from the Ocean. Sievers lives West of Redondo. She estimates that as many as 17 helicopters fly low over her neighborhood daily. A local environmental officer recorded helicopter noise levels of around 85 dB at a nearby school. Helicopters from the LA Sheriff's Department, Long Beach Police Department, and tour and commercial operators provide most of the helicopter flights over Long Beach.

Sievers offered a few suggestions to help reduce helicopter noise in the Long Beach region. First, Redondo Beach should become an inbound route only. Outbound helicopters could go out the so-called Wardlow Route, which goes through an industrial area, then connects to the 710 Freeway over which helicopters could fly. This alternate route would result in four additional miles the helicopters must fly, but the end result

would be significantly quieter for the area residents, she said.

Second, all the helicopters could fly higher over Long Beach because there aren't significant fixed-wing concerns near the water. (However, the Long Beach Airport is located in the middle of the city. And the risk-averse FAA might not allow helicopters to fly much higher in certain areas of Long Beach.)

One Catch-22 situation that all homeowner groups are facing is not moving the helicopter noise problem to another neighborhood where the problem does not now exist. Los Angeles County is crowded. Open spaces are scarce.

Regardless of how helicopter routes are altered, homeowners somewhere, somehow will be impacted by helicopter noise.

Meanwhile, the Coalition, FAA and helicopter pilot groups will try and come up with a workable, voluntary noise abatement plan in the limited time left before the congressionally-mandated regulatory process begins. The clock is ticking.

Double Trouble

The Los Angeles basin and the New York/New Jersey corridor, particularly Long Island N.Y., are the two U.S. regions where there is currently widespread public debate among well-organized groups over helicopter noise.

In the next issue, *Vertiflite* will explore how homeowners associations in the North Fork area of Long Island are dealing with helicopter noise and how the FAA, industry and the U.S. Congress are trying to lower the noise levels.

About the Author

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