

Daily News Editorial: Clear the skies -- Helicopter traffic is not just annoying -- it's pervasive

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Did you hear? A San Fernando Valley congressman is trying to do something about the helicopters that seem to buzz Los Angeles-area homes at any hour of the day and night.

If you didn't hear, maybe it's because the news was drowned out by helicopter noise.

Low-flying choppers are one of L.A. residents' shared unpleasant experiences, like traffic, tagging and the Department of Water and Power. And because of the lack of local jurisdiction in the few feet above city streets, helicopter traffic above L.A. is getting worse -- and more problematic.

It's not just an occasional nuisance; helicopters are now one of the city's worst noise polluters. Practically everyone has had conversation, entertainment or sleep interrupted by them.

When it happens, it's not only bothersome -- it can be worrisome. It could be a medical helicopter: Was there a freeway crash nearby? Or a law-enforcement helicopter: Is a killer on the loose? Is a high-speed chase going by? Or a TV news copter: Is a celebrity driving to court? Is another high-speed chase going by?

At the Hollywood Bowl, patrons complain about helicopters during concerts. And before Shakespeare performances in Griffith Park, audiences are told that because of helicopters (and other outdoor sounds), "this is one theater where it probably doesn't matter if you turn off your cell phone."

Complaints from homeowners in the Valley and West Los Angeles grew louder amid news-helicopter coverage of Charlie

Sheen, who has a house in Mulholland Estates, and the July 16-17 shutdown of the San Diego (405) Freeway, the so-called Carmageddon.

Worse, some of the offenders during Carmageddon were doing nothing more important than carrying sightseers.

Thankfully, last week Rep. Howard Berman, D-Van Nuys, introduced legislation that aims to fix the problem. It is called the Los Angeles Residential Helicopter Noise Relief Act of 2011. It

would order the Federal Aviation Administration to do more than it already does to restrict helicopter flight paths and altitudes in L.A. County.

Berman calls low-altitude helicopters both nuisances and safety hazards, given the sheer number of them that seem to gather in one spot when emergency and news craft convene.

The power to restrict aircraft lies with the FAA, not with local authorities. L.A. officials learned this the hard way in 2003 after City Councilman Dennis Zine proposed banning news helicopters within five miles of freeway chases. (Mayor James Hahn and police Chief William Bratton had urged TV stations to stop airing chases, believing the publicity encouraged criminal copycats.)

Still, lobbying by local officials can, and has in the past, forced changes in air traffic. We encourage Zine and other city officials to sign on to Berman's cause for clearer local skies.

Hopefully, Berman will follow through on this bill and push Congress to take on helicopter noise. Although the House this spring rejected a bill introduced by Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, that would have restricted nighttime flights at Bob Hope and Van Nuys airports, the Senate approved a plan by Sen. Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., to impose restrictions on helicopter traffic above Long Island.

Berman's bill wouldn't totally clear the air. It would contain exemptions for law enforcement, emergency responders and the military. Anyway, the specific changes to routes and altitudes would be up to the FAA.

But it's high time that someone took the issue seriously.