

SONOMA COUNTY AVIATION COMMISSION

Minutes of the January 16, 2025 Meeting

CALL TO ORDER:

Young called the meeting to order at 8:00 a.m.

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Hayssen, Jasper, Jones, McCord, Young

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Hayssen moved with support from Jasper to approve the December 19, 2024, Aviation Commission Minutes. Abstained: None Opposed: None All Ayes: Yes. Motion Carried.

AIRPORT MANAGEMENT REPORT:

A. Complaint Update

Stout reported, in December, there were 577 complaints, compared to 142 complaints in December 2023, marking an increase of 311%. Year-to-date complaints reached 4,660, compared to 1,135 in 2023. Hayssen shared that his review revealed none of the complaints were from aircraft below the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) minimum safe altitude, but noise remained a significant factor. The 5th district accounted for 89.1% of complaints.

Stout reported, for general complaints, December saw 2, compared to 14 in 2023. Year-to-date general complaints were 48, compared to 86 in 2023. Stout explained that Avelo pilot crews had complained about trash in the overflow parking lot, and it was reported as a one-off occurrence. Jasper inquired about surveillance, but Stout confirmed there were no additional reports, and there is no surveillance on that lot.

B. Tower Report/Update

Stout reported, for November operations, the Airport recorded 6,470 operations, compared to 6,936 in November 2023, showing a 7% decrease. Year-to-date operations were 76,629, compared to 77,431 in 2023, reflecting a 1% decrease.

Stout reported that the new Tower Chief would be introduced soon.

C. Airline Update

Stout reported, a new monthly high record was set in December, with 78,599 passengers, compared to 48,306 in 2023, marking a 63% increase. Year-to-date passenger totals reached 772,758, compared to 641,178 in 2023, reflecting a 21% increase. By airline, Alaska accounted for 63.49% of passengers with 490,654, Avelo represented 23.42% with 180,942, and American contributed 13.09% with 101,162 passengers.

A discussion was held about adding destinations and new airlines, but no ongoing discussions with other airlines were reported at this time.

Stout reported that in 2024, there were 10,598 operations, reflecting a 25% increase from 8,513 in 2023. Discussions focused on correlating flights with operations to better analyze complaints. In December, Alaska conducted 728 operations with 232 complaints, averaging three operations per complaint. American performed 122 operations with 32 complaints, averaging four operations per complaint. Avelo completed 212 operations with 56 complaints, also averaging four operations per complaint. Year-to-date data showed that Alaska conducted 7,309 operations with 1,588 complaints, American performed 1,331 operations with 245 complaints, and Avelo completed 1,958 operations with 403 complaints. Across all airlines, the year-to-date average was five operations per complaint.

D. Projects Update

- **Runway Work:** The crew is working overnight and coordinating with the Roads Department for the crack sealing project. Anticipated to resume in March when conditions are warmer.
- **Employee updates:** Andrew Cameron, the new Airport Real Estate Manager, was introduced as Schandel prepares to retire on February 4th. Cameron shared his real estate background. The first new Airport Operations hire starts next week, with a second in the background check process and expected to start in about two weeks.
- **Approach Feasibility Study:** Finalizing comments with Cignus next week. Work on the Phase Two contract to present to the Board is in progress.
- **Airline Apron Reconstruction:** The Board approved Phase 1a of the construction project on January 7th. A preliminary meeting with the contractor addressed scheduling, with a 14-week lead for the underground detention system pending Water Board approvals. The project is expected to start around April 1st, with a pre-construction meeting planned 30 days prior. Coordination with the FAA for subsequent phases and funding continues; \$7.5 million has been secured so far.
- **Airport Restaurants Transition:** A few remaining items are being addressed, with the grand reveal anticipated in the coming weeks.
- **Airport Organizational Review:** 4-year hiring plan for 12 positions is being finalized to submit to Human Resource (HR) and then to the Board of Supervisors.
- **Asset Management System:** The County's Information Technology Department (IT) requires a safety assessment for all software systems, including cloud-based and accounting systems. This involves a detailed questionnaire about data handling. The Airport is working with the IT department and the vendor to complete the assessment and move forward.
- **Consolidated Rental Car Facility:** A meeting with C&S and Mead and Hunt is scheduled later this month to plan the in-house project approach, followed by seeking Board approval for the project.
- **Wildlife Exclusion Fence:** The punch list is in progress. Coordination with the wildlife biologist and FAA is ongoing to update the Wildlife Hazard Plan and finalize the project, pending biologist sign-off.
- **Runway 02/20 Alternate Surface:** No new updates have been provided yet. It is on the priority list, and implementation is anticipated to start by summer.

- **Runway 14/32 Preliminary Engineering Study:** The Airport is focusing on the Taxiway Zulu area and will present the proposed solution to the FAA for approval.
- **ARFF Building Preliminary Concept Design and Budget:** Still waiting for the FAA's cost eligibility determination. The project is on hold.
- **ATCT Siting Study:** The 7460 airspace review for the Tower has been submitted, and additional documentation is in progress.
- **FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant:** Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is reviewing the additional information they requested, with an update anticipated in the next six months.
- **Sustainability Master Plan:** The consultants are finalizing the plan and working on implementation. The next steps will be discussed with the Commission as the implementation phase begins.
- **Airport Microgrid:** A meeting is scheduled with proposers for feasibility study updates. Approval will proceed once the final proposal is received.
- **Hangar Development Request for Interest (RFI):** Interviews with proposers are underway. Cameron will handle the term sheets.
- **Apron E - Helicopter:** The environmental company and Mead and Hunt, are working on a conceptual design and environmental review.
- **Terminal Area Sidewalk:** No change on the improvements.
- **Apron A - Remote Parking:** Questions regarding the construction process and Creek Channel are being addressed by Mead and Hunt.
- **Building Demo:** State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) clearance has been received, allowing the FAA to complete the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation. The contractor has been requested to update the proposal.
- **Website RFP:** The Marketing Specialist is working with the ISD and the IT Department to ensure alignment with website requirements.
- **Security System Maintenance Services RFP:** No change.
- **County Budget Process:** The fee schedule process is underway. Final details on parking and other areas are pending. Parking increases are aimed at addressing parking demand.

E. Future Board Items

Stout reviewed the list of Future Board items.

ACTION ITEMS: None

DISCUSSION ITEMS:

A. Limited Maintenance Provider/Access

Stout provided an update for the Commission. The survey was published on December 22 and will close at the end of the month. As of January 9, the Airport has received 49 responses.

OLD BUSINESS: None

NEW BUSINESS: None

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Stout reported receiving one email comment from Chris Taylor before the meeting:

Chris Taylor, a resident in a valley in Occidental, described how the area, once quiet and untouched by petrochemical pollution and noise, has become increasingly disrupted by air traffic. While he is not opposed to some planes passing through, the amount of air traffic is deemed excessive. It was noted that the FAA, largely unregulated, does not take into account the efforts made in Sonoma County to protect the local wilderness, watersheds, fresh air, and Redwood forests. Taylor expressed appreciation for STS's efforts to address the issue through the noise element and hopes to see a reduction in the number of planes and their noise impact.

Taylor emphasized that this is also an environmental issue. Aircraft were highlighted as contributing to global warming in two ways: greenhouse gas emissions and contrails. Contrails, which often develop into cirrus clouds, trap heat and significantly contribute to global warming. These clouds can spread extensively, sometimes covering large areas. Taylor mentioned that the increase in air traffic has resulted in more frequent sightings of contrails in the valley, leading to the dimming or whitening of the skies, which is viewed as distressing. It was hoped that in a better world, the FAA would be required to conduct environmental studies before assigning flight routes.

Ann Fitzgerald, a neighbor on the West side and a member of the local neighbors' group, primarily focuses on noise issues, particularly from the Helicopter School. She referenced a letter she previously sent to the Board, Airport Administration, and the Board of Supervisors. In her letter, she mentioned very loud helicopter activity on December 5th and 7th, with the aircraft being owned by Sky Hop. She stated that the helicopters were producing noise levels exceeding the Airport limit, with a Huey helicopter measuring a minimum of 100 decibels. The response she received indicated that the helicopters belonged to Cal Fire, but she clarified that they were private helicopters.

Fitzgerald also expressed concern that many neighbors, including herself, had called in complaints about the noise on December 7th, but there was no indication that the complaints were logged. She emphasized the importance of ensuring that any noise complaints are addressed through the Airport's noise abatement protocol, specifically by sending letters to the helicopter companies. Lastly, she inquired about where to obtain more information regarding the hangar development RFI.

Monique Paris, a resident of Occidental, expressed gratitude to the Commissioners and Airport staff for their service. She reiterated her concern about noise and her desire to collaborate with colleagues, friends, and neighbors on this issue. Paris shared the response she received from the FAA regarding the engagement of the community in the RRHED route. According to the FAA, the new departure route was not eligible for community involvement, as it did not meet the criteria for such a process. The FAA also stated that they provided an informational handout to the Airport authorities about the new flight paths.

Paris emphasized the importance of understanding the FAA's position as the community works on this issue, noting that the FAA generally does not relocate flight procedures based on noise considerations, as it may just shift the noise impact to other areas. She also acknowledged the FAA's recognition of the importance of broad education across communities. Paris concluded by emphasizing that the goal is not to shift the noise burden from one community to another without an engagement process that considers all factors.

Andrea Orit, an artist from Occidental, thanked the Commissioners for their support during her previous appearance at the November meeting. She shared that over the holidays, she experienced significant noise disruption at her home in Occidental. Orit mentioned that she has not yet submitted complaints but is in the process of gathering facts to understand the situation better.

Orit also shared that a neighbor, who had been a key advocate for the community, passed away at the end of the year. Orit emphasized that the change in the departure path is a significant concern for those in the Fifth District. She advocates for preserving natural resources, particularly the quiet spaces along the coast, which are now impacted by three new flight paths: routes 14 and 32, as well as the RRHED departure. Orit inquired about the status of the Cignus group's exploration of the departure routes, referencing a deadline on the website for results by the end of December, but was informed that the deadline has been extended to February. She asked for clarification on the next steps after noise complaints are received, particularly how an increase in complaints, like the 500 previously mentioned, is handled.

Brad Albert, a resident of West County near Occidental, thanked the Commissioners for their service and for the opportunity to speak. He expressed concerns about the Charlie Eight departure route. Albert suggested that there could have been more thoughtful ways to design the departure route to avoid concentrating all the aircraft over one area. He pointed out that although the FAA did not require community outreach for the new departure routes, Sonoma County should still meet the necessary requirements for these departures.

Albert proposed that aircraft should initially depart on the Charlie Eight route, even if they eventually need to transition to the RRHED route. He explained that by continuing the Charlie Eight departure until around Cotati, where air traffic control could then vector them to the RRHED route, aircraft would stay south of the affected areas and reduce noise pollution. He emphasized that the Charlie Eight route aligns closely with Highway 101, where the background noise level is around 60 decibels, which would not be noticeable to people on the ground. Once past Petaluma, air traffic control could guide the aircraft directly to RRHED ensuring they continue their intended path without affecting residents. Finally, Albert asked for confirmation that Cignus had been awarded the contract to review the current departure procedures.

Lauren Whittner, a resident of Occidental for over 40 years, shared her concerns about the increasing noise in her area, which she has always associated with peace and quiet. She described a day in October when she was working outside and noted the constant noise from planes. At regular intervals, planes kept passing overhead. The noise was coming from helicopters, private planes, jets, and even military aircraft. Whittner mentioned that she used to wake up to the sounds of quail and owls, but now, she is greeted by planes. The noise has become a constant presence throughout her day, even when walking her dog. She noted that it's not just the intensity of the noise, but the frequency and duration that make it overwhelming. She expressed feeling so frustrated at times that she has considered moving, as the constant noise is becoming difficult to bear.

Becky Purcell expressed frustration with the noise from certain planes, particularly the Alaska Embraer planes, which they find to be significantly louder compared to others since the flight path was changed. She referenced the Sonoma County Airport's 2020 General Plan, noting that it includes a commitment to making planes quieter and ensuring they fly in a manner that preserves the rural nature of the area. Purcell pointed out that the actions being taken by the Airport do not align with the goals stated in the

general plan. Specifically highlighting the failure to follow through on recommendations like using quieter, lower-decibel planes (55 decibels instead of 65). She stressed that none of the points outlined in the general plan seem to be being followed. Purcell requested these items be placed on the agenda.

COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Hayssen shared that he has experience as a lead FAA safety representative for the Oakland district. Pilots have been educated on responsible flying for many years, and some impact has been made. A review of noise complaints shows that numerous complaints about light aircraft flying over the county have significantly decreased. As previously noted in the summary of the noise complaint sheet, the majority of complaints are related to jet aircraft. Efforts have been made within existing limitations, and these constraints have been acknowledged in the FAA's public commentary.

Jasper expressed appreciation for the feedback Paris received from the FAA, which aligned with their own experience. He shared that a change was made to the way traffic was routed in the San Francisco Bay area without input from the public or the Airport. From the FAA's perspective, they have regulatory control over the airspace. Jasper acknowledged the Airport's engagement with Cignus and other contractors to explore improvements, although the work is being done at the Airport's expense. He emphasized the importance of transparency in the process, with the aim of keeping the public informed that progress is being made as quickly as possible. He noted that the next phase would depend on the Supervisor's approving funds, but the contract could take up to 18 months to complete. Jasper recognized the rise in complaints, attributing it to the Airport's success as a transportation hub. He also pointed out that local control is limited, leaving the community to deal with changes made beyond their control. Jasper assured that the communities concerns were being heard, with local representatives like Hayssen not only reading the complaints but also experiencing the noise firsthand. He concluded by acknowledging that while more complaints and comments are welcome, they may not expedite the current process, which must follow the established procedures.

Young commented that Sonoma County's economy is no longer driven by agriculture but by tourism and wineries. He mentioned that before COVID, the county had reached a benchmark, and while the shift is happening, the Tourism Bureau had sought to make Sonoma County a destination, rather than just a day trip from San Francisco. He acknowledged that the county is returning to that role. Young noted that tourism is vital to the economy, and the best way to sustain it is by air travel, as it is the most efficient transportation system. He reiterated that tourism is what sparks the county's economy, and while it brings success, it also comes with consequences.

Responding to specific questions, Young expressed appreciation for the comment about the 60-decibel threshold, noting that the point about hearing a 60-decibel airplane in a quiet environment versus one with ambient noise was helpful and provided context to the complaints.

Regarding the contract for the departure study, Young explained that the Airport is funding the approach feasibility study out of its budget and is asking the Board of Supervisors to approve the second phase of the contract in May. The first phase was approved and funded. He added that he had received a direct email inquiry recently but generally doesn't respond to personal emails since his role is with the Commission, not as an individual. Young stressed the importance of addressing inquiries through the Commission meetings and public comment periods, which are the appropriate avenues for engagement.

Young concluded by discussing the addition of departure studies to the vendor's scope of work, confirming that the departure study would be part of Phase Two.

Jasper added that the Board of Supervisors will likely see a request from the Airport for budget approval for the next phase of work, possibly in May or June. He suggested that one way to support Airport management and their efforts would be for the public to voice their support for the allocation of funds for this work.

Jones followed up on the idea of Sonoma County being a destination, sharing that on a recent trip to Seattle, a young couple sitting next to him on the return flight were from Houston and visiting Sonoma County for a long weekend, illustrating the point that Sonoma County is indeed a destination, not just a day trip.

Jones also commented on his experience traveling in and out of the area frequently with his wife, mentioning that they had started using the Smart Train from time to time, which they found to be a very convenient option. However, he noted that the process of making separate reservations on two different apps for the shuttle from the station to the Airport could be a bit awkward. He suggested making the process more seamless, similar to how the Larkspur Ferry operates. He mentioned that eliminating any complications would make the train option more attractive to others. Jones emphasized that the most awkward part was needing to make a reservation for the shuttle, especially if a flight was delayed, as the shuttle is on-demand rather than scheduled, which can create inconvenience for passengers arriving late.

McCord responded to the suggestion of putting planes on the Charlie Eight route and then vectoring them over, explaining that one of the key issues is controller workload. He pointed out that the standard departure procedures are in place to help Air Traffic Controllers manage the flow of aircraft. Controllers are responsible for managing airspace across a large region, including Petaluma, Napa, and other parts of Northern California. They need planes to follow specific paths to efficiently manage the airspace.

McCord mentioned that he has flown the Charlie Eight route. He acknowledged that controllers are likely considering multiple factors in their decisions, including how to integrate flights into the Bay Area airspace with the least amount of delay. The longer planes stay in the air due to delays, the more fuel they use, which is undesirable for everyone. McCord emphasized that the situation is complex, but with ongoing studies and involvement from the FAA, improvements may be possible over time, although it will take time to see results.

Jasper noted that the FAA's stance reflects their experience with the challenges of trying to address competing interests, acknowledging that it's a difficult situation to navigate.

McCord noted how convenient the local airport is compared to driving to San Francisco International Airport (SFO), highlighting it as a valuable community resource. He emphasized the importance of balancing its benefits with preserving the community and environment.

ADJOURN

Hayssen *moved with support from McCord to adjourn. All Ayes.* Meeting adjourned at 9:07 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jon Stout, AAE, CAE
Airport Manger

DRAFT