

SONOMA COUNTY AVIATION COMMISSION

Minutes of the December 21, 2023 Meeting

This meeting was conducted using a hybrid of in person and over Zoom.

CALL TO ORDER:

Young called the meeting to order at 8:07 a.m.

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT:

Hayssen, Internicola, Jasper, Young, McCord, Starrett **Absent:** None

APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Hayssen moved with support from McCord to approve the October 19, 2023 Aviation Commission Minutes. Abstained: Starrett. All Ayes: Motion Carried. The November Aviation Commission meeting was canceled.

AIRPORT MANAGER REPORT:

A. Complaint Update

Stout reported that in October there were 96 noise complaints compared to 115 in 2022, a decrease of 17%. In November there were 154 complaints compared to 52 in 2022, an increase of 196%. Year to date as of November there were 993 complaints compared to 843 in 2022, an increase of 18%.

In October there were 12 general complaints, compared to 9 in 2022. In November there were also 12 general complaints compared to 2 in 2022. Year to date there are 72 general complaints compared to 46 in 2022, a 57% increase.

Hayssen asked about general complaints versus noise complaints. General complaints are unrelated to airplane noise. He commented that between 2000-2022 airport operations were at 140,000 per year, dropping to 70,000 and now rising to nearly 93,000 operations annually. Hayssen noted he has received complaints about the restaurant food, coffee and prices, and the PA system in the terminal being inaudible.

Stout said we are working on the PA system, including adjusting for background noise and training gate agents on proper use. The restaurant is within 10% of average of comparable local restaurants for prices.

B. Tower Report/Update

In September there were 7,187 operations compared to 7,243 in 2022, a decrease of 1%. In October there were 7,565 operations compared to 7,320 in 2022, an increase of 3%. Year to date we are at 70,495 compared to 78,801 in 2022, a decrease of 11%.

Hayssen asked if the tower was sufficiently staffed as the National news commented on shortages. Stout said yes, at times they may need 1 extra person, but based on discussions with the Tower, overall they are sufficiently staffed.

Internicola asked if there were any incidents in the past 60 days. Stout said we don't always get reports on saves by the tower, but there was 1 report of a potential issue where a helicopter was sitting on Runway 2 and due to topography and shrubbery, it wasn't visible, and they almost cleared an aircraft to use Runway 2.

Stout added that painting and modifications to the runway have greatly improved things.

C. Airline Update

October set a new monthly record with the highest passenger month ever with 62,305 passengers compared to 59,939 in 2022, an increase of 4%.

In October there were 7,097 airline operations compared to 8,156 in 2022, a decrease of 12.98%. A year ago, we averaged 76 passengers per departure now we are at 87.

In November there were 59,535 passengers compared to 52,360 in 2022, an increase of 14%.

Year to date there were 592,872 passengers compared to 569,764 in 2022, an increase of 4.06%. Fog caused some significant flight cancellations, around 90%, for a day and a half. Some other cancellations were due to heavy rain and wind.

Internicola asked about updates on United Airlines flying to Denver. Stout noted they have not been responsive to our outreach.

STS hosted a small airline conference in November. Alaska Airlines may increase service to LAX. Due to congestion and construction at LAX, they decreased flights from four per day to one. They are potentially going to increase to two flights per day with a bigger airplane.

American will be flying an Airbus 319, with 136 seats, to Dallas when that route returns in May. The airbus should alleviate the problems they were having in the past with a smaller plane where some passengers were denied boarding in the summer months due to the heat, distance, and amount of fuel.

Avelo has no planned changes in 2024.

Sun Country may potentially fly out of STS in the fall.

D. Projects Update

- **Employee updates:** Our new marketing person, David McCluskey, started in November. He brings a lot of experience in social media and good ideas. One of our operations staff members resigned. We conducted interviews this week so that process is moving forward. Regretfully, Katie Cincotta has announced her resignation. We are currently going through the process now for her replacement.
- **Terminal updates:** We are still working with Permit Sonoma on the final permit of occupancy. STS was one of the recipients of the North Bay Business Journal's Construction of the Year award.
- **Approach Study:** We had our community meetings November 1 & 2. Approximately 150 people were in attendance. This first phase was data gathering; reviewing noise complaints, flight track analysis and procedures published by the FAA. Next, STS will be reviewing analysis on the potentially amended procedures presented by the consultants and present them at community outreach again in the Spring. We will then present them to the Board of Supervisors for concurrence and the publishing phase, which includes visual approach and departure procedures, which will be incorporated into a fly quite program and an updated noise abatement program.

- **Airline Apron Reconstruction:** A contractor has been selected, during the kick-off meeting they discussed scheduling the potholing and site investigation work and we anticipate having an estimated contract price by April first.
- **Airport Restaurant Transition:** They are still working on permits. They are now anticipating the renovations to begin in March.
- **Accounts Receivable System:** We are in the testing phase right now to make sure correct data is going in and coming out. We are hoping by March, hopefully February we will be able to start invoicing tenants.
- **ConRac:** This project is still on hold.
- **Wildlife Exclusion Fence:** We had the Pre-construction kick off meeting. They have begun with the outriggers and wiring, and the heavy work will happen next spring.
- **Runway 02/20 Alternate Surface:** Still working with the FAA on processes and approvals. Hopefully once it dries out in the Spring, we will be able to use it.
- **Security Services Contract:** We completed the transition in November. Most of the staff were prior staff and they transitioned very well to the new contractor.
Young asked if the staff were pretty much the same, what are we doing to resolve the complaints about the staff interface with the public?
Stout Commented through different training and different management styles.
Young asked if we have noticed any difference in attitude or is it too early to tell?
Stout said it was a little too early to tell but has noticed a slight shift in attitude. There is more oversight under the new management and a different mindset.
Hayssen noted that we have not received any major complaints about the security people like we had in the past, so that is a good sign.
- **Vending RFP:** Do to the mix of local and larger brands for some of the machines, we have had some supply chain issues, such as the manufacturer sending the wrong machine for one of the vendors. Some vendors are still working on permits.
McCord asked if the machines were located before or after security?
Stout said it is a mixture of both.
McCord asked if there will be information for people letting them know there will be things available after security?
Stout said the new marketing person will be working on that soon.
- **Rental Car RFP:** On hold until we find out about what is happening with the ConRac.
- **Airport Admin Building Back up Generator:** The switch gear and conduits has been installed. We are just waiting on the delivery of the generator. It will hopefully be here by mid-February and the project completed by mid-March.
- **Runway 14/32 Preliminary Engineering Study:** We had the kickoff meeting a week and a half ago. The survey crew started work last night and will be working the next 3 nights doing a survey of the pavement and taxiway connectors. The geo-tech company will be out early next year to do core samples. We are looking at 2027/2028 for construction. There are a couple of areas that need to be reconstructed. There is an FAA conduit under the taxiway that is causing about a 1" bump that can be felt when landing and some of the WWII storm drains that have disintegrated, and we need to figure out what to do with those.
- **ARFF Building Preliminary Concept Design and Budget:** We are starting the concept design and consulting with Sonoma Fire District.
- **ATCT Siting Study:** Working with the auditors office to the payment for the reimbursable agreement. We are just waiting on the check before we can get started.

- **FEMA Hazard Mitigation Grant – Tree Removal Phase II:** Still in process, waiting on final determination.
- **CARB EV Offroad Grant – EV Tractors:** We received a for two. One was delivered 3 weeks ago, the other will be here around March or April. The brand is Monarch and each is equivalent to about a 65-70 HP diesel and can run up to 12 hours on a single charge. They are autonomous which could potentially allow one operator to use one mower and the other mower could track with him.
- **Sustainability Master Plan:** We are nearing completion of data gathering for the company that is working on it. We have supplied them with about 70% of the data they need so far. We hope to have public involvement meetings on that in late Spring. Our goal is to have it finalized and approved by the Board this Fall.
- **Airport Microgrid:** The Airport has been interviewing firms that do microgrids. When we go to a full EV fleet it is a significant power demand and PG & E states it may be more than a decade to get that power because it is over 5 megawatts. Waiting to find alternate sources and do a feasibility study based on what it would take to build a microgrid. The Clean Coalition in Sebastopol has been very helpful in helping us find firms that do microgrids. We are hoping for approval in Mid-January for the feasibility study. It could potentially be as quick as 4-5 years that we could have a microgrid to supply power to the rental cars.
- **Approach Tree Topping:** Every couple of years we have to top the trees near the approaches on the runways, conducting those activities soon.
- **Hangar Development RFI:** Stout is working on the final review for Apron's F & D and the historical house on Laughlin Rd.

Regarding the Approach Feasibility Study, Hayssen commented that Sebastopol was well attended, although neither were well attended by pilots. Stout added that these meetings were not necessarily intended for the pilot community. Those will be separate meetings held after we have some drafts recommendations. Hayssen volunteered himself and McCord to conduct a community outreach meeting for pilots. Hayssen mentioned that as a result of the outreach meetings, it opened up a dialogue for District 5 Supervisor Hopkins to meet with her representative next Wednesday to continue the conversation about what the Airport is doing with the noise management and other issues.

Regarding the Airport Microgrid, Jasper asked for an update on the project to have the County start paying rent for the jail space.

Stout said that Director Hoevertsz has been meeting with the Sheriff and the Deputy County Administrator on that issue. It is not moving as fast as we would like, but they have been having meetings and asking us for updated information.

Jasper asked if there would be back rent or if it would just be going forward? And when would it begin? Stout said it will just be going forward but does not know when this will go in effect.

Jasper would like to be kept up to date on this topic.

Young asked about the parking revenue yearly totals.

Stout said the total to date is through October 2023 was \$2.1 million.

Young commented that comparing 2013 -2023 parking revenue, up about 1m. The County jail property could generate more parking revenue.

Jasper asked if the Airport reaches capacity? Stout said we do reach capacity. We have about 1,000 spaces. The lots fill up during holidays. Jasper asked if there is a next step for parking?

Stout said one thing that will really help is getting a rental car facility. That will free up all the spaces the rental car facilities are taking up right now, which is about 25%.

Hayssen asked about parking reservations and how many no shows there are.

Stout said it is less than 1%.

Stout will be meeting with Director Hoevertsz early this year to discuss some future parking options.

ACTION ITEMS:

None.

DISCUSSION ITEMS:

A. Airport Land Use Commission

Young brought up that there is a discussion about the consolidation of the Airport Land Use Commission into the Planning Commission and doing away with the Airport Land Use Commission or changing the profile of the Airport Land Use Commission. Hayssen is a strong advocate for revitalizing the Airport Land Use Commission as this airport more than qualifies for the requirement to have a land use commission, so regardless of the consolidation, we do have a mandate and we need to move forward to an active quorum of four members. Stout commented that a person from Permit Sonoma said the biggest problem is they don't have a quorum and membership has not really been active. There are currently 4 applications, Airport Managers have one appointment available. Stout will be working with other Airports for that selectee. Young asked if there have been any projects delayed due to the commissions inability to meet? Stout said there have not. Stout added that he may ask the Aviation Commission to make a recommendation on the County's representative. Young would like this to be a discussion item for the next meeting to check on progress. Does not need to be an action item though.

NEW BUSINESS:

None.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

Ann Fitzgerald, a neighbor who lives on the West side of the airport, is present representing other neighbors who are unable to attend. She noted that she feels the airport has done a pretty good job with the good neighbor policy and marketing efforts, her only complaint is with communication and responsiveness to her complaints.

She thanked Hayssen for his comment today about the letter she submitted at the last meeting. While she appreciates Mr. Young's comment about Helico not being solely responsible, she feels they are 99% responsible.

Ann commented to Stout that she was interested in the meeting with Helico, the tower and the community, but has not heard any information about that. She continued that not everyone is savvy and online, noting that she only heard about the community outreach meeting from the STS website, the day before it happened. She questioned the sincerity of community participation. And lastly, she has never received a response to any of her complaints.

Joe Messina said that Helico has bombed his neighborhood. It has gotten worse. Helico has no respect and feel that the airspace is public, and they can do what they want. That is not right. Messina noted they fly over his house every three minutes. This is a safety and wellness issue. Nothing is getting done about it. He feels they are being harassed now, and since the last meeting they now have two helicopters at a time bombing their house. It may be legal that they can do this, but it is not right. He wants responses from their complaints. Helicopters should be flying over the industrial park and vineyards, not houses as that feels like retaliation. Messina commented that none of the questions submitted after the outreach meetings have been responded to.

Michael Robison has noticed an increase of helicopter noise. He took into consideration airplane noise when moving near the airport. The helicopter wasn't an issue until several years ago. The noise and flights have steadily increased. The hours the flights occur are 7 days a week, in the mornings, evenings and afterhours. It is difficult to enjoy outside space. This has gotten to be a quality-of-life issue. At times there are two helicopters, like in stereo.

Michael added that he was traveling on the road adjacent to the airport and had seen a truck dumping concrete into a vineyard. He stopped and took pictures and told them to leave. He could tell it was a contractor and had done this before. He has the license plate number if we also have issues with them dumping on our property. Young added he would like that plate number as he has also seen this waste.

Ron Mercer said Helico is getting way out of control. He doesn't have an issue with the airport at all. But the helicopters fly over his house over and over, seven days a week. He said it is annoying and could there please be something done about it.

Toni Mercer added that it is having an effect on her mental health. She calls and complains, and they fly over even more. She asked if there was anyone present from Helico? It is unreasonable that they refuse to change any behavior. It's daily and constant. Sometimes starting at 9:00am and going until 5:30pm. They flew over her house 120 times in April. She doesn't want to be outside her house and even inside, where she has double-pane windows, she hears them. She says it is very debilitating and has cost a lot.

COMMISSIONER COMMENTS:

Young and Starrett asked why some of the comments on the previous minutes were highlighted? Katie said those were new commentors.

Hayssen commented that during the last meeting, Stout was going to hold a meeting with the helicopter operators and concerned citizens. Did that happen?

Stout said we have had meetings and we are working on solutions. We are working on another meeting with Helico. Joe Messina commented that it has gotten worse.

Young added that being safe and efficient are the most important things. Helico is flying exactly where and how they should be based upon the airport layout. There is no easy, simple solution.

Hayssen thinks raising the altitude of fixed wing to 1200 feet so helicopters could move up another 200 feet would help. Jasper noted that if everything is moved up, it will also move everything out, which would mean the noise would go on longer. He asked Stout if there are discussions on-going with the FAA? Stout commented that we do want to keep the traffic on both runways consistent. He noted that Alex, from the tower, is talking with the regional manager for air traffic.

Jasper, addressing the public about helicopters said, this has been a reoccurring issue and this is maybe the third meeting where we have had public participation, whether by letter or in person comments. But what he is hearing from everyone is, do something.

He does not know where we suggest that they move to. The East side of the airport, where the business side is, is the primary approach for the airlines, so they can't be asked to move over there because that wouldn't work for the FAA.

Regarding the altitude, the fixed wing airplanes are operating at a defined altitude, 1,000-1,500 feet above the ground and the FAA requires the helicopter to be below that. So, they have to be on the West side, because the East side is occupied by airplanes, and they have to be below a certain altitude. That puts them right over your homes. He hears the frustration to do something. He does not feel that the Aviation Commission has the jurisdiction or ability to tell a flight school where they can or cannot fly. He is sensing the rise in frustration that something isn't being done. We can facilitate communication and try to provide information. But I don't know that we have the ability to make them do something.

Toni Mercer asked if they have any governments at all? Jasper responded, yes, lots. They are a flight school so they are governed as a business and there operations are greatly governed by the FAA. This is a federally supported airport that receives federal grant money and that requires the airport to allow things like private and commercial operations, flight school operations, medivac, the Sheriff.

Over the years, the County has accepted tens of millions of dollars in grant funding to build things such as runways, and the terminal and as a result, operations are allowed to occur here.

Jasper noted that the Commissioners are volunteers and are trying to build bridges and communicate but they don't have the authority to say that this flight school can't operate out of the airport or can only operate 5 days a week for six hours a day. Ron Mercer asked how Helico got permission to be here?

Young answered partly Sonoma County and partly the FAA.

Internicola noted this is his last meeting and he would like to thank Supervisor Coursey for allowing him to serve. It has been a pleasure to work with this group. He also wanted to compliment Manager Stout for all of the projects he has managed over the years and his hard work is highly supported and appreciated.

His dream for the Airport as he leaves is for Sonoma County to be considered the greenest airport in California. As we continue to grow, build better connections with our neighbors and offer people safe, efficient and affordable connections around the world.

It has been an honor to be here. Young, thanked Internicola for bringing a different perspective, which was helpful, to the commission. He continued to comment that the Sonoma County is that way it is, in part due to the wineries and the tourists and the airport is an important part of that. The community is different than it was in the 50's, 60's and 70's, yes, very much so. There are positives and negatives about that. Yes, we hear the frustration to respond Ann's frustration that she felt there is no investigation. We do look at every noise complaint to see if there was a violation and in the past 6 months there was one or two that had the potential to be a violation by an aircraft operator. It not that something being done here is wrong, it's just having an effect on a very small area. Many of the places are within 2,000 feet of an active runway.

Yes, the Aviation Commission is a conduit for communication. The best the commission can do is to give advise and consent to the Board of Supervisors.

Young recently flew with Helico and with the exception of the houses located within a few thousand feet of the runway, they are doing exactly what they should be doing. Does it have an effect? Yes. Is there a way to mitigate it? I don't know. Messina said they were here before the helicopters.

Young commented that his house is also greatly affected by the increase in growth in Sonoma County and it's frustrating at times, but it is a part of a growing community. Jasper asked Young if he came to any conclusions after taking a flight with Helico about where or how they are operating or the noise impact? Young said safety and efficiency is where they are operating.

Jasper commented on investigations and response, if someone filed a noise complaint against a pilot flying an airplane 400' feet above downtown Sebastopol, we would look at that, validated that and take it to the FAA. The FAA would then contact that pilot and potentially take some action.

Young said yes, that is a possibility. Jasper commented if the flight school is operating around runway 2 about 500 feet off the ground, which is a legal altitude for them, there isn't anything further to investigate. It's noisy and annoying, but that is not an investigation.

Hayssen commented that we have had a number of helicopter operators here over the years, maybe two since Stout has been here. Stout added that there have been at least three helicopter flight schools here. Hayssen noted that they found ways to operate and train without annoying neighbors.

Young added that the other flight schools were not that successful and not training as many people. If they were training one student per day it probably wouldn't be an issue. But they are training all day.

McCord wanted to thank the community participants for sharing their frustrations in a cordial way. He wished that they could come up with a solution and implement it next week. He said things are being looked at such as a different place they can go. The problem is, that it is a successful flight school. We will continue to work with the tower and others to mitigate, but wanted to say that he appreciates them coming and presenting their frustrations cordially.


Ann Fitzgerald commented that they are successful, but at her expense. They are flying under 100 feet and she has documentation videos, over her home. She is glad to hear that the complaints are being heard.

Hayssen thanked Internicola for serving on the panel and wished him luck in his endeavors.

ADJOURN:

McCord moved with support from Internicola to adjourn. All Ayes. Meeting adjourned at 9:54 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Jon Stout, AAE, CAE
Airport Manager