

The following article was published in the Santa Cruz Sentinel on December 12, 2004.

Prepared and submitted for print by WPA member John F. Cowan.

Watsonville Airport: An Irreplaceable Asset

The Watsonville City Council is currently pursuing the development of high density housing to the west of the Watsonville Airport that may eliminate or shorten two of the Airport's runways. To do so would be a mistake. Doing anything that would diminish the utility or safety of Watsonville Airport would be a grave error. Others can speak to the value of the Airport to the local economy, to the owners who base aircraft there and to the pilots who train and fly from the facility. I am concerned with public safety and the well being of the Airport's neighbors.

As was amply demonstrated after the 1989 Loma Prieta Earthquake, in times of danger or public emergency, the Watsonville Airport is an irreplaceable safety asset to the entire region. The Airport is also integral to the national transportation and defense systems. After the Earthquake, thousands of flights brought needed supplies and personnel into a region reeling from disaster and cut off from normal access to Santa Clara, San Benito and Monterey Counties. In the course of the effort, volunteer pilots, mostly flying their own aircraft, brought in hundreds of tons of food and relief supplies. The City of Watsonville may own the Airport, but, far more importantly, it holds the Airport in trust for every one of us who resides in this region. Think about geography for a moment. If you live in the City of Santa Cruz, the Watsonville Airport is twenty minutes away by freeway, but the Monterey and Salinas Airports are fifty and sixty miles distant, via two lane or city roads, and San Jose Airport is thirty miles away across notorious Highway 17.

Of course, no one realistically suggests that Watsonville Airport be closed, but there is a serious attempt to close or shorten Runway 8/26 in order to facilitate the construction of 2300 houses directly west of the Airport. (A single runway is twice designated, according to the directions it faces. Runway 8 faces roughly East and Runway 26, roughly west.) The short-sightedness of this proposal is stunning. Intelligent planning suggests, and the Watsonville Airport Land Use Compatibility Plan requires, an appropriate buffer zone of open space or low intensity development around the Airport. Instead, it is suggested that high-density residential development be allowed within the buffer zone and that the runway be removed or shortened on its west end.

In its present configuration, Runway 8/ 26 is important to the safety and utility of both the Airport and its surroundings. This runway is utilized in times when fog or strong east or west winds prevail. And common sense indicates that runways are never made safer by shortening them. At present, Runway 8/26 is long enough to accommodate all traffic utilizing the Airport. Shortening it would force larger Aircraft to use Runway 2/20 during adverse conditions, while smaller aircraft would necessarily continue to utilize Runway 8/26. This creates the risk of collisions at the intersection, one of which occurred shortly after World War II, when a Naval jet collided with a private airplane. Nor would shortening the runway add materially to the safety of the proposed housing development. (An analysis of the costs to safety inherent in a shortened Runway 8/26 has been prepared by Dan Chauvet of the

Watsonville Pilots Association.)

For an example of what might happen to the City of Watsonville in the future, consider the sad case of San Jose's Reid-Hillview Airport. When Reid-Hillview was established in 1939, it sat alone in the middle of open fields. After World War II, Santa Clara County experienced its remarkable population boom - as Watsonville is booming today. Pro-development City Councils and pro-development Boards of Supervisors disregarded the cautions of local aviators and approved adjacent housing to the east, west and north of the Airport.

As predictably as night follows day, the residents who purchased those homes began clamoring for the Airport to be closed. Who knows? Perhaps they assumed or were told when they bought the property that the Airport would eventually be removed. It didn't happen. Things got worse. Just as the development juggernaut was beginning to slow, the construction of Eastridge Mall was approved, over the objection of the flying community, immediately to the South of the Airport. The Mall sits beneath the final approach path to the Airport's two most utilized runways. Shortly after construction was complete, an aircraft on final approach lost power and crashed onto the roof of the Mall.

One has to sympathize with Reid-Hillview's neighbors. They tend to be from lower income groups and most probably would not choose to live adjacent to an airport with many thousands of flight operations per year. And the people to blame - the irresponsible developers, government officials and "civil servants" who created this conflict of uses - are long gone. I put the term civil servant in quotes, because these people did not serve their community well. Money talked and they listened. They put private interest ahead of the public good. And the problems of Reid-Hillview Airport will no doubt continue to fester as the decades roll by.

Another example is also instructive. For three decades, my family lived about a mile from Allentown-Bethlehem-Easton (ABE) Airport in Pennsylvania, a busy terminal accommodating frequent full sized jet airliner traffic. But we didn't live beneath an approach or departure corridor. No one did. We regarded the airport as entertainment, and could set our watches to the arriving flights. Good community planning made ABE a good neighbor.

What's the point? The point is that the City of Watsonville and the County of Santa Cruz have it within their power to keep Watsonville Airport from becoming a Twenty-First Century Reid-Hillview. All they need do is maintain a sufficient buffer of open space or very low-density development adjacent to the Airport. All they need do is adhere to the existing Land Use Compatibility Plan. It's not too late, if only our government leaders and civil servants will put the good of our community ahead of the desires of private developers, if only they will retain both the utility and safety of Watsonville Airport by buffering it comfortably from the encroachment of high density development.

A video documenting the public safety effort centered at Watsonville Airport in the aftermath of the Loma Prieta Earthquake is available for presentation to interested civic and government groups. We are also attempting to make it available in DVD format.

by John F. Cowan, 613 Navarra Drive, Scotts Valley, CA 95066
831-438-5116 e-mail at jcbiz@pacbell.net