

October 13, 2015

To: Haines Borough Mayor and Assembly Members

Re: Mead/Hunt Helicopter Noise Study (including excerpts from audio recording)

After the Mead/Hunt Helicopter Noise Study presentation to the Assembly at the COW meeting of September 23, a clearer picture of the content and implications of the study are emerging. I encourage those assembly members who were not able to attend the meeting to listen to the audio recording of the meeting while viewing the slideshow Mead/Hunt used during the presentation. I have included some excerpts here that I think are especially pertinent to our community's understanding of the study. The notations in parenthesis refer to elapsed time on the audio recording.

How useful is the DNL metric for our community? Mead/Hunt states:

“Generally it [DNL] was developed for airports really more than helipads, it still applies from a federal standpoint.” (33:17)

“You are not bound by sticking to this, you're not a federally funded operated airport, you're not bound by this...” (36:23)

“Federal criteria of DNL is difficult to apply in a quiet environment like this, it's commonly a problem for helicopters.” (42:07)

“Many communities have elected to go with a lower DNL level to define land use compatibility which is perfectly acceptable to do.” (1:10:54)

How was the FAA's 65 DNL threshold arrived at?

The 65 DNL threshold was based on citizen surveys in the 1970s of how annoying aircraft noise was around existing airports at the time. 65 DNL was identified as the cut-off point above which additional federal EA or EIS review is required and federal funding for airport construction, soundproofing of buildings and mitigation measures are determined. Federal programs consider above 65 DNL as incompatible with residential uses. Due to increasing airport use and noise, there has been dissatisfaction with the 65 DNL threshold. The FAA is currently conducting new resident surveys to measure levels of aircraft noise annoyance, again at existing airports in large urban areas.

“Those [original] community surveys were done in basically urban areas where the difference in the ambient and the aircraft or helicopter noise was much less than what you find in Haines.” (1:06:55)

How does the ambient noise level affect the audible duration of a helicopter event?

“If you got low ambient you’ll hear it longer, if you have high ambient you won’t hear it as long.” (30:58)

“You really have a low ambient or park-like setting for a lot of areas in the Haines environment, you don’t find that everywhere.” (39:50)

The ambient noise levels (without helicopter events) in the noise study ranged from a low of 20 dB to a high of 35 dB.

“These are quite low ambients which explains to some degree why the durations are quite long because you have a long periods of time that you’ll be able to hear that sound.” (27:39)

The audible duration of helicopter sound in the study ranged from 2 to 12 minutes.

Would using the C-weighting scale, which includes low frequency sound typical of helicopter noise, result in higher DNL values?

Mead/Hunt states that “helicopters do have a low frequency component.” (37:26)

“You’ve brought up an argument that is out there in the industry that helicopter noise or low frequency, why don’t you use low frequency metrics that weight it, I don’t think it’s 40 dB difference between A and C, I think it’s more in the 10 to 20 so numerically you would have come up with a higher value but there is no criteria or other things to compare it with.” (54:08)

At the presentation Mead/Hunt said it would supply more information about the noise study including DNL values for ambient noise levels and the various equations they used to compute the data. At the time of writing this comment letter I have not seen that information.

Locating a heliport in the General Use Zone requires a higher level of scrutiny through the Conditional Use Permit process than for other noise generating activities. Mead/Hunt states that the study shows there is a 40 dB increase from the ambient noise level to the single event maximum noise level of helicopter take-off/landing. (29:28) Clearly, locating a heliport in the area of the noise study would have a large negative impact from “undue noise” on that neighborhood.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Weishahn