

South Bay Cities Council of Governments

October 23, 2014

TO: SBCCOG Board of Directors
FROM: SBCCOG Steering Committee
SUBJECT: Helicopter Noise within the South Bay Region
PREPARED BY: Jim Gazeley, Council Member, City of Lomita

The South Bay, and the Los Angeles County region as a whole, has been struggling with the increasing effects of helicopter noise. It may be surprising to learn that there are virtually no requirements for helicopter operators to follow when flying throughout the area. Further, no environmental studies have been done when permitting helicopters to operate, there are no databases of helicopters or helicopter owners, there is no centralized complaint system, and no best management practices for helicopter operators to utilize when flying over residential areas. Due to this lack of regulation, the City of Lomita is requesting that the SBCCOG Steering Committee support the request that our State Legislature apply pressure to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to create unbiased regulations that helicopter operators must follow.

BACKGROUND

The FY14 Federal Transportation Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Bill, approved by Congress and the President in January 2014, included language requiring that the FAA work with helicopter operators and community representatives on methods to reduce helicopter noise in Los Angeles County. Should the FAA not be able to come to an agreement between the two parties than they must begin developing helicopter noise regulations at the end of 2014.

The areas listed within the appropriations bill that must be addressed by the FAA are the following: (1) evaluate and adjust existing helicopter routes above Los Angeles, and make adjustments to such routes if the adjustments would lessen impacts on residential areas and noise-sensitive landmarks; (2) analyze whether helicopters could safely fly at higher altitudes in certain areas above Los Angeles County; (3) develop and promote best practices for helicopter hovering and electronic news gathering; (4) conduct outreach to helicopter pilots to inform them of voluntary policies and to increase awareness of noise sensitive areas and events; (5) work with local stakeholders to develop a more comprehensive noise complaint system; and (6) continue to participate in collaborative engagement between community representatives and helicopter operators.

To achieve this voluntary goal the helicopter operators, the LAAHNC, and the FAA have created six working groups. The City of Lomita is actively involved in the South Bay Routes and Altitudes Working Group (SBRWG). The group has met almost every month for the past ten

months. The goal of the working group is to determine if there are other route options available to helicopter operators and if higher altitudes are feasible. The SBRWG initially developed 12 voluntary practices (see attachment A to be handed out separately) however; they have been met with great resistance from the helicopter operators who have been reluctant to set requirements on their flight paths and altitudes. For example, at the September 4th meeting the goal was to discuss the possibility of a minimum distance in which helicopter operators could fly off-shore when flying along the shoreline (goal number 11). The SBRWG proposed one mile off-shore as a starting point and was willing to consider a counter proposal from the helicopter operators. The SBRWG also stated that the suggested one mile distance off-shore would be a guideline but could be modified by the pilot while in flight due to extenuating circumstances such as weather, visibility, etc. The helicopter operators stated that every flight is different and were opposed to establishing any minimum flight distance and no agreement was met. This is one example as there has been no progress on any of the goals. Another example is how Robinson Helicopter, the number one manufacturer of civilian helicopters in the world, has refused to meet with the committee at their location and refused to provide any test flight data such as what routes they use and how many test flights they perform during any given time period. Further the FAA has attended each meeting, and although they have been tasked with finding an agreement between the operators and community groups, has remained relatively neutral. They have remained so neutral that in March of this year, California State Senators Barbra Boxer and Diane Feinstein wrote a letter to the Federal Administrator of the FAA on “the lack of progress” and they are concerned that “the FAA is relying on volunteer community stakeholders to complete the tasks that the FAA has been assigned to do”. The City is seeking to apply pressure to the FAA so they will create the regulations that helicopter operators will be required to abide by which will hopefully eliminate a majority of the noise impacts to the residents below.

The City would like to highlight that the United States Coast Guard has assisted in the effort to curb helicopter noise by volunteering to better distribute their training routes and to fly as high and far off-shore as possible. Due to their actions, City staff has had a dramatic decrease in complaints from Coast Guard flights.

It is unfortunate to note that after ten months of stakeholder meetings that no progress has been made. It appears as if the helicopter operators are willing to take their chances with the FAA establishing regulations over creating any voluntary measures. The City is requesting that the SBCCOG Steering Committee send this staff report, with the attached proposed voluntary practices from the entire LAAHNC working group, to our Federal and State Legislators and request that they apply pressure to the FAA to create unbiased regulations that helicopter operators must follow to dramatically reduce helicopter noise.

ATTACHMENTS TO BE AVAILABLE AT THE MEETING:

- A) South Bay Working Group Proposed Voluntary Practices to Mitigate Helicopter Noise
- B) LAAHNC Voluntary Practices to Mitigate Helicopter Noise Impacts Over Los Angeles Region

RECOMMENDATION

The Steering Committee recommends that the Board approve the request by the City of Lomita to send this staff report, with the attached proposed voluntary practices from the entire LAAHNC working group, to our Federal and State Legislators and request that they apply pressure to the FAA to create unbiased regulations that helicopter operators must follow to dramatically reduce helicopter noise.