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Specific Plan Amendment Study meeting focuses on safety

BY HELGA GENDELL

Airfield safety at Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) rather than scheduled planning concepts to move the northern runways were discussed at the sixth meeting of the LAX Specific Plan Amendment study at the request of local politicians, according to Mike Doucette, chief of airport planning for Los Angeles World Airports (LAWA), the Los Angeles agency that owns and manages the city's airports, including LAX.

The meeting, Wednesday, October 25th, was held in the Proud Bird Restaurant.

Doucette said that Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, 11th District Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl — whose district includes LAX — and City of El Segundo Mayor Kelly McDowell and City of Inglewood Mayor Roosevelt Dorn requested that the focus of the meeting be the important and complicated issue of airfield safety.

In his presentation, Rosendahl told the audience that he needs to be convinced with an abundance of evidence that moving the northern runway would truly improve safety conditions and potential incursions at LAX.

Rosendahl also noted that Villaraigosa appointed him as the representative for the City of Los Angeles to the Southern California Regional Airport Authority (SCRAA) regarding discussions with other counties about mass transit infrastructure as it pertains to air travel on a regional basis.

The first meeting of the reconstituted Southern California Regional Airport Authority was held October 12th to discuss the status of the regionalization of commercial aviation in Southern California, Rosendahl reported.

LAX's Doucette told the audience, some members of which expressed anger about delaying the subject of northern runways options, that the next meeting would cover that subject and would be held after Thanksgiving or in early December, at a time to be determined.

Doucette also said that with the presence of the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration), it would have been a conflict of interest to discuss northern runway options.

The panel put together by LAWA to answer questions consisted of Raymond Jack, airport manager II at LAX; FAA safety officer Colonel Dave Kurner; Nick Johnson of Johnson Aviation (a consultant to LAWA); and Doucette.

This meeting had a different format than previous meetings, where separate groups discussed important issues and then the issues were presented to the entire audience.

At this sixth meeting, the audience completed speaker cards with questions that were then read out loud in front of the audience and into the record for the stenographer taking notes for LAWA.

Jack said that the airport has a 78-year legacy of dealing with airfield issues, and he compared it to the old Pasadena Freeway, which had on-ramps with stop signs.

Jack told the audience that LAX runway incursion maps are available on-line at www.lawa.org by entering "acsmp" in "search" and clicking on "runway incursion maps."

A runway incursion, according to the FAA, is any object that creates a collision hazard within one mile while an aircraft is taking off or landing.

Pilot error and controller error account for a majority of incursions, and Jack said that moving the northern runways would allow that much more room in case of a miscommunication between pilots and the control tower to avoid a deadly incursion.

He pointed out that pilot training is the responsibility of the FAA, but LAWA also wants to educate pilots with an informative CD and posters.

The FAA's Kurner explained that he looks at incursion events, putting together information, the cause of an incursion, and how to approach changes and educate airport management, pilots and air controllers on how to make improvements.

Then Runway Safety Action Teams and Plans are put into place to facilitate improvements, Kurner said.

"Roughly 80 percent of runway incursions at LAX occur on the south side of the airport," Bill Withycombe testified in March before the Aviation Subcommittee on Airspace Redesign over Southern California. He is the regional administrator of the Western-Pacific Region of the FAA and Kurner's superior.

LAX has implemented new safety procedures with new lighting and signage on the runways to assist pilots in accurately identifying where to land and take off, according to this panel.

Kurner said that bigger, faster airplanes are coming to LAX, which has a 51-year old-design, and that improvements like moving the northern runway are commensurate with the "needed growth of LAX."

"The FAA's major goal is to increase capacity handling, and we want the number of flights we can get, we need this," said Kurner.

Little information was presented to rationalize moving the northern runways, and the potential threat of deadly incursions on the northern runway seemed to be the focus.

During public questions, an audience member asked why LAWA doesn't partner with airlines to establish use of other airports?

Doucette responded that the Palmdale Airport is receiving a government grant that will be matched and people will be "incentivized" to fly from Ontario and Palmdale Airports, both owned by LAWA.

LAWA wants an increase in air traffic at Palmdale, but it's more than 60 miles from downtown Los Angeles and there is no demand, said Doucette.

The question of an "air apportionment study" was raised by an audience member, to again look at air toxins and pollutants affecting communities around LAX.

Other audience members questioned the number of incursions and the category of those incursions, rated from A to D, with A being the most severe.

The addition of a center taxiway would reduce the safety separation on the runways, according to one speaker.

Kurner said that records showed 37 incursions on the southern runways and 14 on the northern runways between 1998 and 2005.

One audience member asked how lack of sleep and long hours affected the decision-making capabilities of both pilots and controllers.

Denny Schneider, vice president of ARSAC (Alliance for a Regional Solution to Airport Congestion) said that no studies have been done on the northern runway and that LAWA should hold off on any plans.

The ARSAC position on moving the northern runways states, "Local residents acknowledge the reality of existing LAX impacts. Not a single study justifies using safety concerns to lengthen the runways or to move them 340 feet further north.

"The last major incursion was again on the south runway, despite only one of the runways being in operation.

"Over 80 percent of the incursions occurred on the south side, despite comparable separation distances with the north complex.

"Incursions on the north side were human error that will not be alleviated by the LAWA desired change.

"Increased FAA controllers and runway status lights would be more appropriate, and spending billions of dollars to increase aircraft capacity with the corresponding noise, pollution and gridlock, is just unacceptable.

"Any plan must be a benefit to local communities, the traveling public and the airlines that serve them. LAWA is violating the spirit of the settlement agreement assurances, and we look forward to mayoral intervention, and wonder when the simple, common-sense airport fixes will be revealed so that billions of dollars are not needlessly spent, and residents betrayed and angered if the airport goes forward with its plans."