In this on-going series on helicopter noise, Vertiflite studies the issues in two more US communities.

Noise on East Long Island

The residents in and around East Hampton Airport near the eastern tip of Long Island, New York are unhappy about the increase in aircraft noise, particularly the clamor generated by helicopters carrying commuters and weekenders flying to and from New York City.

To help bolster their claims about excessive aircraft noise, residents point to a recent report by Young Environmental Sciences and Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, a consultancy, that showed a rise in the incidents of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft exceeding the town’s noise limits in 2013.

On one side of the issue are the fed-up residents, who have endured years of aircraft noise with little help, they say, from the aircraft operators and federal authorities. On the other side sits the aviation industry, including the Eastern Region Helicopter Council, which claims the report is incorrect and doesn’t show the increased level of compliance by helicopter operators to the town’s noise level limits. Nor does the report take into account noise abatement procedures that were implemented some time ago by operators to reduce noise in and around East Hampton.

Over the last few years, there has been a 40% increase in helicopter traffic at the airport, claim citizen groups. Blade, the helicopter taxi equivalent of Uber, is one of the principal reasons why helicopter noise is on the rise around East Hampton, according to Kathleen Cunningham, who heads the Quiet Skies Coalition, a citizens group. The service is quite popular. Spread the word through the Blade app, get the passengers loaded at the 34th Street Heliport in New York City, and away you go. Passenger loads to the East Hampton Airport have been steady. But so too have been complaints about the increased noise around East Hampton Airport and elsewhere on Long Island.

However well intentioned, noise abatement procedures adopted by the air transportation industry are only successful if pilots follow them. Cunningham said the best way to reduce fixed-wing and rotary aircraft noise is to limit operations at the East Hampton Airport. At present, the airport is open 24 hours a day, seven-days a week.

The problem for residents: the town does not control East Hampton Airport. Years ago, East Hampton Airport received a grant from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to repair runway and taxiways. In exchange for accepting those funds, the town signed grant assurances/obligations (GAs) to FAA. Four of the GAs limit the town’s right to control aircraft access to the airport. But those obligations sunset at the end of 2014. Once that happens, the town will have a legal right to limit daily operations and possibly impose a curfew.

The issue of helicopter noise has for years been a hot-button topic on Long Island, particularly the North Shore, which runs along Long Island’s northern coast, bordering Long Island Sound. Noise from aircraft – helicopters mainly – got so bad that residents solicited help from Senator Charles E. Schumer (D-NY). The result was a voluntary plan that moved helicopter routes on the North...
In this video grab from Labor Day 2010, an S-92 flies in low above the roof of a homeowner in East Hampton, New York to the estate of nearby billionaire investment banker Ira Rennert. (Image by Frank Dalene, East Hampton Noise Coalition)

Noise in the Windy City

Helicopter noise is also a growing concern in the city of Chicago, though not yet as much of an issue as in New York City. There, some civic leaders have suggested a ban on tourist helicopter rides over the Hudson River that runs alongside New York City. Jeff Smith, vice president of the Eastern Region Helicopter Council stated that such a ban would devastate the New York City area helicopter tourism, which generates more than $33 million in the local economy. “That is always their excuse for noise,” said Ted Rueter, founder of Noise Free America. “They don’t bother...
of the helicopter industry remains, which indicates more work needs to be done to bring both sides together. Jerry Mead-Lucero, organizer for the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO) stated in a news release that the heliport will add yet another source of noise and air pollution to the neighborhood.

Noise Free America’s Rueter had a final word on the subject: “Even though the Chicago Helicopter [Experience] project was, unfortunately, approved by the Chicago Planning Commission and City Council, I’m certain that people in Chicago will continue to fight for peace and quiet. No one wants their neighborhood constantly assaulted by noise.”

True, but efforts in Los Angeles County and on Long Island, NY, to some extent, show that cooperation between anti helicopter noise-groups, local and federal officials and the rotorcraft industry is possible, if occasionally fractious. And that is a good start toward conflict resolution.

About the Author

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Blade uses an app that allows users to book a seat or crowdsource a charter on Liberty Helicopters. Regular flights from New York City to the Hamptons are increasing flights and noise complaints at East Hampton Airport. (Blade)