



Noise in the Cities—Revisited

By Robert W. Moorman

In 2014 and 2015, Vertiflite published three articles that considered the views of noise-affected residents and helicopter operators as part of our ongoing series on helicopter community noise in America. AHS is now revisiting New York, Los Angeles and Chicago to update readers on new and existing noise mitigation proposals for these communities.

Late last year, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio issued a draconian ultimatum to air operators in order to reduce helicopter noise over the Big Apple: either cut air tour flights in half by 2017 and eliminate all flights on Sundays or the city would not renew their operating leases at the Downtown Manhattan Heliport (DMH) on Pier 6.

The air tour operators had no choice but to agree. Better to lose half of their revenue than risk going out of business completely.

“The city was close to pulling the operator agreement, which would have all but killed the air tour business over Manhattan,” said Sam Goldstein of the Helicopter Tourism & Jobs Council, which negotiated the deal with the city.

The agreement was in lieu of two bills being prepared by the New York City Council that would have banned all helicopter tourism flights from the five boroughs.

Mayor de Blasio was caught in the middle between angry residents and the

A recent deal in New York City cuts in half the nearly 60,000 annual flights from the Downtown Manhattan Heliport due to noise concerns. (Helicopter Flight Services photo)

51-member New York City Council on one side, and the air tour industry, which provided significant revenue to the city and impressive views from above for tourists, on the other.

More than 59,000 flights had been operating from the Pier 6 heliport annually. Five helicopter tour companies operate from DMH, which is owned by the city and managed by Nevada-based Saker Aviation.

Asked if the agreement to halve the flights was considered a victory for noise-conscious residents of Manhattan, John Dellaportas, president of Stop the Chop NYNJ said: “Absolutely not. This is a

sham deal and a massive giveaway to the helicopter industry. The City extended the operators leases for five more years in exchange for reducing the flights down to 2013 levels.”

He added: “The Sunday ban helps a little, but the rest is indistinguishable.”

Visitors to the Stop the Chop NYNJ website are greeted with a New York Times op-ed piece that states succinctly the organization’s view of helicopter noise. The piece, “A Plague of Helicopters is Ruining New York,” claims that helicopters “pollute the environment, harm our children and make us miserable.”

Dellaportas said some cities called

AHS Community Noise Initiative

In recognition of the increasing community noise complaints and successful efforts to restrict helicopter usage, AHS International initiated an effort with HAI to help the technical and regulatory community better understand and address helicopter noise and noise complaints. Go to www.vtol.org/noise to learn more or to download past articles and technical reports.

AHS has been convening community noise workshops at each Annual Forum, and has held presentations and discussions with FAA to educate the headquarters staff on the technical underpinnings and the dramatic, immediate noise reductions possible through Fly Neighborly procedures. AHS is also working to support helicopter noise research of the FAA’s Aviation Sustainability Center (ASCENT) and other organizations, and encouraging dialogue between the different constituencies.



The Chicago Helicopter Experience changed from Robinson R44s to Airbus H130 AStars and moved to a pad that is separated from residents by a river to the north, and railroads and highways to the south. (CHE photo)

Stop the Chop NYNJ for advice on how to deal with helicopter noise. But most calls came from rural areas and those close to or associated with parks and wilderness areas.

"I am not aware of any other city that is plagued by tourist flights like New York City," said Dellaportas.

Nevertheless, the possibility exists that other municipalities could follow the path taken by New York City to curb helicopter noise.

"If New York City can do it, I don't see why any other city can't do it," said Jeff Smith, vice president of the Eastern Region Helicopter Council (ERHC). "It all comes down to who holds the lease, who operates the airport, and whether the municipality zones for it."

Elsewhere, nearby, there have been helicopter noise-reducing developments. The New Jersey State Legislature last year introduced a bill that would have prohibited New York City air tour helicopters from using New Jersey heliports and airports. But the bill died when the legislative session ended. It's unknown if the legislature will address the noise issue during the next session.

Helicopter pilots say both initiatives in New York and the New Jersey are potential job killers.

Long Island Clamor

Upscale East Hampton, New York, on the eastern tip of Long Island, is another community that wants to reduce helicopter noise by restricting rotorcraft operations.

In July 2015, East Hampton issued three restrictions for helicopter

operations in and out of East Hampton Airport (HTO). One proposal mandated a curfew for all aircraft between 11 pm and 7 am. Another rule set a curfew from 9 pm to 9 am for what the town deemed noisy aircraft with a 91 EPNdb (effective perceived noise level in decibels) or higher. The third restriction, which a federal court enjoined in June, allowed only one trip per week in and out of HTO for noisy aircraft. The city appealed the 'once-per-week' rule, which lies with the US Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in lower Manhattan. A decision is expected by year-end.

Kathleen Cunningham, who heads the Quiet Skies Coalition, a citizens group, said the helicopter industry aided by the ERHC and the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) have not been helpful in reducing noise levels at HTO.

The ERHC gives "lip service to local residents who complain, but there has been no help from them, said Cunningham. "I'm not unsympathetic to a certain degree, as the ERHC is a trade group.... While it represents the industry to some extent, they can only make recommendations to their membership."

ERHC, helicopter operators and the FAA maintain that noise abatement procedures issued sometime ago have reduced noise in and around East Hampton.

Cunningham criticized the FAA for not enforcing noise restrictions on operators such as Blade and HeliFlite for their "rapacious appetite" to expand their businesses and not heeding citizen requests to observe a "reasonable altitude in and out of HTO and all across the East End."

As for the FAA, the agency demonstrated "that it is beyond reluctant to govern helicopters, in particular, no less other fixed-wing aircraft that consistently violate recommended altitude standards in our area on the East End of Long Island," she said.

Another point of tension among East End residents is the so-called "New York North Shore Helicopter Route," a collaborative effort between industry, local, state and federal leaders to reduce aircraft noise by mandating use of a published helicopter route according to FAR Part 93 Subpart H. Residents expected the rule to expire in summer 2016. Instead, the FAA extended it for another four years — which increased the friction between the authorities and local residents. The FAA said it extended the rule to provide time for additional research on helicopter noise so it could develop a final route that "works for the residents of Long Island and is responsive to the concerns the FAA has heard from the public."

Some view the North Shore Helicopter Route positively because it is a diversified route structure. Others say the solution is flawed because it reduces noise for some residents while increasing noise for others.

The North Shore Helicopter Route is defined by a series of GPS waypoints, and specifies a minimum altitude of 2,500 ft (760 m) above ground level (AGL) unless there are weather or safety issues.

While it has lessened noise on the western region of Suffolk County and Nassau, the North Shore Helicopter Route has done little to ease the noise on the East End, said Cunningham.

Extending mandatory use of the North Shore Helicopter Route brought out a coterie of local, state and federal leaders, who roundly criticized the FAA for its insensitivity to residents.

Rep. Lee Zeldin (R-NY), who represents the First District of New York, and serves on the Subcommittee on Aviation, condemned the FAA's four-year extension of the North Shore Helicopter Route colorfully.

In a statement, Rep. Zeldin said the extension was an example of "incompetence and arrogance on the part of faceless and unaccountable federal bureaucrats."

Zeldin asked FAA Administrator Michael Huerta to reconsider his decision or resign.

The congressman is in an awkward



Helicopters routinely fly low over Horace Mann Elementary School in Long Beach, California, leading residents to believe that local operators are not using helicopter routes established to mitigate noise. (Video still by Christine Votava, courtesy of the LAAHNC)

position. On one hand, he must consider the concerns of his constituents, while recognizing that his congressional colleague, Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y) helped create the North Shore Helicopter Route.

The citizens would like the FAA to adopt a “South Shore” route or require helicopter pilots to fly east toward Plum Island before proceeding to South Fork, where most helicopter traffic goes. It’s not known if the FAA is seriously considering such a proposal.

LA Backstep

When *Vertiflite* last visited Los Angeles County, it found opposing forces trying to find solutions to a host of helicopter noise related problems — a monumental task in a region that is home to nearly 10 million people living within four thousand square miles (10,575 km²), larger than the combined areas of the American states of Delaware and Rhode Island.

Distrust was replaced by guarded optimism, and both sides appeared willing to work together for the common good. Not so this time around. In just over a year, the situation has deteriorated noticeably with each side blaming the other for the lack of progress in reducing helicopter noise.

On one side is the Los Angeles Area Helicopter Noise Coalition (LAAHNC), a loose-knit group of homeowners scattered throughout the county. On the other side are various facets of the helicopter industry, including air tour

operators. The FAA is caught in the middle, trying to play referee and explain succinctly what is and isn’t possible from a regulatory and safety standpoint.

LAAHNC Chairman Bob Anderson (who was interviewed extensively in the prior article on LA noise) resigned. No reason was given for his departure and his successor had yet to be named. Anderson declined to be interviewed for this update, referring all calls to the LAAHNC.

“The situation between the [LAAHNC] Noise Coalition, the pilots and FAA has degraded some,” said Morrie Zager, president of the Professional Helicopter Pilots Association (PHPA). “But, I also agree with FAA’s assessment that significant progress has been made in reducing noise.”

Two major issues seem to have soured relations between the LAAHNC and the rotorcraft industry. One is the overarching issue of whether there has been any progress in reducing helicopter noise over Los Angeles County. A rider inserted into the 2014 \$1.1 trillion US federal funding bill compelled the FAA to demonstrate that significant progress had been made in reducing noise in the region. Affirmative, claims the FAA.

In its 2015 report to Congress, the FAA listed several areas of progress in mitigating helicopter noise in the region. That incremental progress included funding a dedicated helicopter noise complaint system for Los Angeles County. Helicopter operators and the LAAHNC now discuss complaints during monthly meetings. The coalition lists the most egregious helicopter noise complaints for the previous month, and the helicopter pilots and operators try to determine the cause of those complaints. Industry representatives contact helicopter operators for an explanation for the noise and attempt to resolve the situation.

In another sign of progress, the FAA informed Congress that it completed an analysis of adherence to existing voluntary helicopter routes and mentioned the potential for adjustments in the Hollywood, Torrance, Palos Verdes

and Long Beach areas.

In June 2016, the FAA published a voluntary offshore route plan for Los Angeles County to lessen helicopter noise along the coast between San Pedro and Malibu, about a 30-mile (48-km) stretch. This decision was not well received by citizen groups.

The LAAHNC criticized the report to Congress and the FAA’s subsequent voluntary offshore route plan because they weren’t consulted on the proposal.

“We disagreed completely with the report,” said Richard Root, LAAHNC vice president, who represents the Torrance-based Citizens for Quiet Helicopters. “We felt that very little progress had been made. There were no agreements made.”

Convinced that its concerns were not being met, the LAAHNC filed a petition in October 2015 for Special Federal Aviation Regulations (SFAR) to reduce helicopter noise in LA County.

The coalition wanted the FAA to establish the following rules: a countywide minimum altitude of 2,000 ft (610 m) AGL for all non-emergency helicopter flights; and a minimum distance of 0.5 mile (0.8 km) for all coastline flights; maximum hover/orbit times of five minutes for media flights and three minutes for tour flights; and a requirement for media outlets to pool aerial coverage.

The 2,000-ft (610-m) minimum altitude requirement is “absolutely impossible to do,” said PHPA’s Zager. “That altitude puts us up there with IFR [instrument flight rules] and fixed-wing traffic.”

In May 2016, the FAA dismissed the LAAHNC’s proposed SFARs. The LAAHNC filed an appeal, which was pending at press time. “We are not anticipating a favorable response,” said Root.

A few days after the appeal was filed, the FAA notified the LAAHNC that the voluntary offshore route would be 750 ft (229 m) offshore, not a half-mile as the LAAHNC wanted. The relationship between both sides seemed to go down hill from there.

The original goal of the FAA and industry was to bring stakeholders together and develop voluntary best practices to mitigate helicopter noise throughout LA County. This would include Long Beach, which is at the southern edge of the county; Torrance, in the southwestern region of LA; the expansive San Fernando Valley, which is north of the LA basin; the Hollywood Bowl; and the Hollywood sign.

Chuck Street, Executive Director of the Los Angeles Area Helicopter Operators Association (LAAHOA), who was praised for listening to homeowner noise concerns and suggestions, and served as a bridge between opposing sides, stated how grim the current situation is.

"After months of attending and participating in numerous meetings I came to the conclusion that we in the industry would never come to an agreement with the homeowners coalition," said Street. When informed by experts that some of their proposals were "unworkable and unsafe, they just stuck to their original positions," he added. "Some LAAHNC members said those are just excuses."

Street said some LAAHNC members told him privately that there had been improvements in some areas of the region. But the "official" position of the LAAHNC was that there had been no progress.

Individual LAAHNC members were willing to talk to *Vertiflite* about helicopter noise problems in their region of LA County, but declined to speak for the

coalition until the board chose a new chairman and determined their next move on a host of helicopter related noise issues. Seeking help from the State of California on reducing helicopter noise is one idea being bandied about, *Vertiflite* learned.

Despite the friction, the PHPA and helicopter operators are determined "to be good stewards of the industry."

Zager pointed to two areas, the Hollywood Bowl, which operators consider to be a success story, and the Hollywood Sign, which remains a problem due to the numerous daily flights of sightseeing aircraft. Neighborhoods below the Hollywood Sign file more noise complaints than any other area of Los Angeles, said the LAAHOA.

PHPA held meetings with the air tour operators and shared best practices on operating near the Hollywood sign. When flying in the vicinity, pilots should fly 1 mile (1.6 km) south of the sign at a minimum altitude of 1,600 ft (488 m) above mean sea level (MSL) and 900 ft (274 m) AGL. If pilots must fly closer to

the sign, they should climb to an altitude higher than 1,800 ft (549 m) MSL.

Zager believes these best practice recommendations to reduce aircraft noise are being followed, but concedes that aircraft noise remains an issue.

Adding to the problem is that the Hollywood Sign sits in the downwind path of IFR traffic for Santa Monica Municipal Airport (SMO) and Los Angeles International Airport (LAX).

The LAAHNC said these best practices for operation near the Hollywood sign are not good enough, and that some regulatory action is necessary.

As for the Hollywood Bowl, the PHPA and LAAHOA asked pilots to avoid flying near the venue during concert season. To help, pilots are advised to look for spotlights illuminated in a crisscross pattern during concerts. PHPA member also distribute large posters to local airports, fixed base operators (FBOs) and helicopter operations about upcoming concerts at the Bowl — which seems to help, Zager said.



LAX has one of the busiest and most-complex airspaces in the world, and also sits in the vicinity of a years-long dispute between fed-up residents and local operators. Some helicopter routes transitioning through the Class B airspace prescribe altitudes as low as 1000 ft MSL ... or even 500 ft just east of the surface area to avoid the flow of airline traffic. This is well below the 2,000-ft AGL minimum altitude proposed by the Los Angeles Area Helicopter Noise Coalition. (FAA chart)



Neighborhoods below the Hollywood Sign file more noise complaints than any other area of Los Angeles, due to the numerous daily flights of sightseeing aircraft. (Helinet photo)

Long Beach is another area of continued concern over helicopter noise. One third of all LA County helicopter flights originate from the Long Beach

Airport (LGB) and use the Redondo Avenue route to mitigate noise. Yet helicopters routinely fly 13–15 times a day over Horace Mann Elementary

Calm in the Windy City

Since Vertiflite’s last visit, Chicago Helicopter Experience (CHE) has moved its company headquarters from Bridgeport to a five-acre (2-hectare) downtown location on the Chicago River in the Pilsen neighborhood on the New South Side.

Business is steady, and the concern from Chicago area citizen groups of an increasing noise problem due to the move has not materialized, according to CHE.

“Since we started flying [from the new location], we haven’t had a single noise related issue,” said Trevor Heffernan, president and CEO of the company. “It is not perfect and not everyone is unaffected by the move. However, it is not what they [detractors] said it would be, that everyone’s lives would be ruined.”

Many citizen complaints about helicopter noise near the new headquarters facility were unfounded, Heffernan said, because they came before CHE began operations downtown mid-May 2015.

Calls to Noise Free America, which helped a citizens group of the Pilsen neighborhood fight CHE’s plans to build the \$12.5M helipad, water taxi dock and observation deck, were not returned.

CHE’s ongoing dialogue with the city over noise and other issues has allowed the company to build trust with local leaders. CHE hosts a community meeting every quarter at its headquarters to hear various issues.

The location downtown was chosen purposely to mitigate the noise impact on the surrounding community, said Heffernan. The vertiport is located behind railroad tracks and two highways, with the river to the north and over 1,200 ft (365 m) from any homes or businesses. CHE continues to fly its flight path over I-55 out to the lakefront. Most of the flights are out on the lake.

All CHE pilots receive noise abatement procedures training for approaches and departures. The company does not fly before 10 am or after 10:30 pm typically. Seventy-five percent of CHE’s business is air tours, with the rest being charter flights.

CHE operates a fleet of single-engine Airbus Helicopters EC130 (now H130) with the Fenestron shrouded tail rotor, which helps ensure a noise level 7 dB below ICAO’s Chapter 8 level. According to several air tour operators, the helicopter is one of the quietest operating today.

School and the adjacent neighborhoods.

“Residents have concluded that despite our ongoing collaboration, helicopter pilots do not utilize the Redondo Avenue route, but rather fly over the school on both inbound and outbound flights,” said Donna Sievers, LAAHNC board member and vice president of the Bluff Heights Neighborhood Association. “For FAA or the helicopter industry to claim that there has been significant improvement in helicopter noise mitigation in Long Beach contradicts the Long Beach Airport data and is a complete fallacy.”

The issue of helicopter noise over various regions of the US is unlikely to be solved anytime soon. But continued education and communication between all sides is paramount to any resolution. In LA County, as in other communities, a new awareness of helicopter noise by pilots is the most obvious benefit to date. As part of a long-term solution, noise abatement procedures training will go a long way in reducing helicopter noise, industry and residents agree.

“Through training, proactive community outreach efforts and, in general, flying in a neighborly manner, rotorcraft operators can go a long way to minimizing the impacts of their operations on communities,” said Chris Martino of Helicopter Association International.

AHS International and HAI have been working with the FAA to promote understanding of helicopter noise and adoption of Fly Neighborly procedures.

“Each pilot must be mindful of the noise impact of their aircraft on the residents, who live below the flight path,” said the LAAHOC’s Street. While Street referred to Los Angeles County, the message could apply to helicopter operations over any community.

About the Author

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