

CHICAGO TONIGHT

POLITICS

O'Hare Noise Complaint Advocates Meet with Mayor

Eddie Arruza | January 27, 2016 4:43 pm

The expansion of O'Hare Airport has brought two new runways and the closure of another in the last two and a half years. The result has been a sharp increase of noise in communities surrounding the airport – many of which never had issues with airplane noise before.

City and suburban residents have demanded that the Chicago Department of Aviation take steps to address the problem and today Mayor Rahm Emanuel met with members of one community group.

The main group leading the charge to get relief is called Fair Allocation in Runways. FAIR has had several meetings with Department of Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans, but they say she has not given them what they want. And they've been asking to meet directly with Mayor Emanuel.

The group says the mayor has turned them down 23 times until today. Representatives from FAIR met with Emanuel and Commissioner Evans in the mayor's office this morning. Afterwards, this how the group said the meeting went.

Colleen Mulcrone “We were pleased to finally meet with the mayor after two and a half years of asking for a response to the real and negative lived impact that people have been suffering with for two and a half years,” said Colleen Mulcrone of FAIR. “Unfortunately, the result of this meeting was more of the same and it’s business as usual. We were advocates for those diagonal runways that we want to keep to provide noise relief to the most communities.

“We feel, as we have before presented strong cases to keep them, that they are safely operable, that the FAA has used them in the past, would not use unsafe runways, and we’re told that that is not going to happen, so this really was a waste of our time.”

So are residents living under these new flight paths out of luck?

The group says it's not going to give up and the city believes some recommendations they've presented will help alleviate the noise ... eventually. We'll have more on that in a few moments. But as the O'Hare Modernization Plan moves forward, it continues to evolve—

some would say digress from the 2005 concept. And a number of federal and local governmental agencies, suburban officials, Chicago aldermen and community groups all are looking to have a say on how it should progress.

For now though the noise issue seems to be the loudest concern.

Video taken by the Village of Bensenville shows how one of the new flight paths into O'Hare Airport has transformed the suburb. In neighboring Wood Dale, Dawne Morong has lived in her home for 12 years but says her life turned hellish after October 2013 when O'Hare opened a new east-west runway.

Dawne Morong “The jets just got incredibly loud and low and I have a daughter with Down syndrome—sensitive ears—it was getting to all of us but heartbreaking when you see your daughter do this and this [motions covering her ears with her hands] inside your house,” Morong said.

Last October, the city inaugurated its newest east-west runway only a couple of months after decommissioning one of its old diagonal runways. The O'Hare plan calls for the decommissioning of the airport's other major diagonal runway in 2019. But the diagonals say anti-noise advocates sent planes over mostly forest preserves and industrial areas. The Chicago aviation commissioner, however, calls the diagonal fatally flawed, saying the FAA is pushing to phase them out.

Ginger Evans “They basically have three strikes against them. The first and most significant are the fact that they point at other runways, so these flaws were pointed out in the original EIS as being a problem,” Ginger Evans, city of Chicago department of aviation commissioner. “Those problems have increased. As the FAA has increased their restrictions on use of runways in that type of a configuration, the FAA issued a new finding in April of 2014 called the converging runway operations rule that even further restricts use of those runways.”

The FAA may restrict the diagonals but doesn't rule out that they can be utilized and the group FAIR would like to see them used in off-peak hours to help reduce air traffic over their communities.



“The re-evaluation of the environmental impact statement that was published in October that was when they had the hearings in August,” said Mulcrone. “The FAA said that they would look at if the city recommended keeping those two diagonal runways, we didn’t get a firm answer that the city formally recommended looking at that or for the uses which FAIR has recommended which is during the off-peak hours and during overnight hours which would provide the most relief to communities.”

As it stands now, the O’Hare plan calls for yet another east-west runway north of the terminal and the extension of an airstrip alongside it. The city also says another reason the western diagonal runway needs to go is to build a western access road into the airport.

So far the mayor hasn’t said anything about his meeting with FAIR. It’s probably safe to say that Commissioner Evans is towing the administration's line. However, at last year’s mayoral runoff forum hosted by “Chicago Tonight,” the mayor was asked about keeping those diagonal runways to help ease noise issues. Here is what he had to say:

Rahm Emanuel “You can insulate homes but you can’t insulate your outside, and people that have homes in the neighborhood, O’Hare has to be a good resident. Now the solution to this is getting FAA to expedite its study so we can actually have O’Hare if they want and decide to do it to basically have all of the runways used at appropriate time,” Emanuel said of the diagonal runways.

Residents impacted by noise seem to be registering a lot of complaints. By one account, 63,000 people have filed complaints with the city and FAIR says that even though today's meeting didn't get them any closer to relief, they are hoping other elected officials will help. For one, freshman 41st Ward Ald. Anthony Napolitano has introduced an ordinance that requires City Council approval on major decisions for O’Hare. Right now the Aviation Department can act unilaterally.

But Commissioner Ginger Evans insists that a city a plan introduced last August will provide relief.

“The most significant relief that well come at least short-term is the recommendations we made on rotating the use of the runways at night,” Evans said. “We’re very optimistic that that can bring very immediate relief to people. I believe that several members of the committee, who have been working very hard with us on that issue, also are very optimistic that we can bring short-term relief. Several measures on the plan also speak to relief in the noise long term as well.”