

Panel OKs plan to spread out O'Hare jet noise

Test program would rotate runways for overnight flights

BY ROBERT MCCOPPIN CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Overnight flights at O'Hare International Airport would rotate among runways to spread the airplane noise to different areas under a test plan given preliminary approval Tuesday.

The plan marks a rare moment of agreement between airport officials and leaders of surrounding communities, who generally welcomed it as a promising, if short-term, step to relieve jet noise.

But some critics said it does nothing to address the ultimate point of contention between city officials and residents: whether to close diagonal runways that could spread out noise the most.

The Fly Quiet Committee, with nine voting members from Chicago and the suburbs, recommended rotating runways on a weekly basis from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m. When possible, the hours of the rotation would begin at 10 p.m. and end at 6 a.m., depending on traffic and other conditions.

The change would mean that night takeoffs and landings would not be concentrated on the same two runways on the south side of the airfield that run between Bensenville and Schiller Park.

The recommendation will go for a vote March 11 before the full O'Hare Noise Compatibility Commission, which is made up of more than 50 municipalities and school districts, plus Cook County. If approved as expected, Chicago Department of Aviation officials said they will bring the plan to the Federal Aviation Administration for implementation by May. FAA spokesman Tony Molinaro said the agency would determine

how best to test the plan on flight operations.

The program would then run for six months, and the resulting noise data and public feedback would be analyzed to see if and how the nighttime runway rotations should be used permanently.

“It’s a quick fix that provides some relief for people, and it isn’t that difficult to implement,” Bensenville Mayor Frank Soto said. “It shows everybody is really trying to work together.”

People who live around the airport have complained about its noise for decades, but complaints intensified in recent years after the city began shifting from the old diagonal runways to new parallel east-west runways, which concentrate more traffic over the North Side of the city and the western suburbs.

Fair Allocation in Runways, a group that represents city and suburban residents, welcomed the plan to spread out the noise by including the main diagonal runway, which runs northwest to southeast, avoiding the hardest-hit residential areas.

But FAiR member Al Rapp, of Park Ridge, said the plan will ultimately fail if the diagonal runways are closed by 2019, which Mayor Rahm Emanuel has said is necessary to complete the new runways and proposed western access to the airport.

Rapp objected that the plan didn’t specify exactly what runway configurations would be used. Once those plans are published online, he said, residents can judge which runways provide some peace and quiet.

Chicago aviation officials said the proposal marks a consensus between the city and community groups to relieve noise in the hardest-hit areas, particularly Bensenville and Schiller Park, as well as nearby areas such as Itasca and Wood Dale.

“The city’s goal is to provide immediate relief for communities most impacted by nighttime noise, and that’s what this plan will accomplish,” Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans said. rmccoppin@tribpub.com

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