

# Commission OKs O'Hare noise reduction plan



A passenger jet flies low over homes in the 4800 block of Harold Avenue in Schiller Park on its way to landing at O'Hare International Airport on March 10, 2017. A noise reduction commission voted to restart a controversial runway rotation program. (Antonio Perez / Chicago Tribune)

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**A** noise reduction commission voted Friday to restart a controversial runway rotation program at **O'Hare International Airport** — the latest strategy in a perennial struggle to provide volume relief to nearby residents.

A tweaked version of the program, which aims to reduce nighttime airplane noise in the loudest areas, was approved by the O'Hare Noise Compatibility Commission by a 36-10 vote.

That all but clears the way for a new 12-week test run, which is expected to begin in May, pending approval by the Federal Aviation Administration.

The goal of the so-called Fly Quiet program, which was tested for six months last year, is to spread night flights and noise around through a weekly runway rotation. But residents in some communities northwest and

northeast of the airfield — like Park Ridge, which was among several northern suburbs to vote against the plan — said they ended up with more jet noise during the trial run.

Officials have acknowledged that the test program directed additional flights over Arlington Heights and nearby areas, while diverting noise from hard-hit areas like Bensenville, which lost hundreds of homes and businesses to airport runway expansion.

The latest plan to reduce airplane noise from O'Hare has been discussed in campaigns for local offices, with municipal elections looming on April 4, and on local government boards in recent days.

Des Plaines Ald. Malcolm Chester, who sits on the commission, told fellow City Council members Monday that he predicted the plan would pass.

"It's kind of a situation where most of the people who are on the commission benefit by putting the planes over us, to be quite blunt about it," Chester said.

The commission is made up of city and suburban municipal officials.

Most representatives of the northwest suburbs voted against the plan, out of concern that the use of the diagonal runway called 15/33 would send more air traffic over their residents.

Chester said Friday that he voted against the plan for other reasons, arguing that flights from 15/33 primarily goes over industrial and commercial areas before flying high over homes, while other runways send flights directly over houses.

The ultimate criteria for routing flights, he said, should be how many homes are most affected.

Mount Prospect Mayor Arlene Juracek was one of the few northwest suburban representatives to vote for the plan, saying it should bring noise relief sooner to many people during the spring and summer, when windows are open.

By spreading the flights around, Juracek said, "What we're trying to do is share the pain."

But members of the residents group Fair Allocation in Runways opposed the plan, saying it reduced usage of the diagonal runways and would leave more large, noisier planes over the city.

"The goal is to relieve the most severely impacted communities, and we're doing the opposite," FAiR member and Chicago resident Daniel Dwyer said.

In spring 2018, runway 15/33 is due to be closed, which Chicago officials say is necessary to build the sixth and final new east-west runway, 9 Center, as well as to make way for western ground access to the airport and a new tollway around the west side of the airfield.

FAiR members are fighting to keep that diagonal runway open as a way to disperse the noise, though city officials say it is a moot point. Commission members are considering whether they will test rotations that exclude 15/33 even before it's gone.

Ultimately, FAiR members would like to see limits on the number of flights at night, in part by spreading cargo flights to other airports in the region.

In addition to Arlington Heights, Park Ridge and Des Plaines, representatives from the following municipalities voted against the night-time runway rotation: Downers Grove, Elmhurst, Hoffman Estates, Palatine, River Forest, Rolling Meadows and Schaumburg.

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