NEW ROUTES MEAN MORE NOISE FOR SOME HOMES NEAR AIRPORTS

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The push to modernize air-traffic control is finally starting to result in faster flights. That's music to the ears of many travelers, but wall-rattling, sleep-depriving noise to many homeowners around the country.

The Federal Aviation Administration is redrawing the paths flights follow as it switches from ground-based to satellite navigation dubbed NextGen. Some communities say they weren't fully warned about the new flight paths, and now neighborhoods that never had much airport noise are getting bombarded. Opposition groups from Washington, D.C.'s Georgetown neighborhood to Silicon Valley are blitzing airports with hundreds of thousands of noise complaints and a few lawsuits to stop the changes.

The growing controversy poses a big new challenge to the U.S.'s effort to improve air transportation, boost capacity and speed up travel.

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Part of the problem is the precision of satellite-based navigation. Planes used to tune in radio frequencies and flew toward beacons or simply were assigned directional headings by controllers. Flight paths ran across a range of airspace. Many houses got some noise each day; now fewer houses get more noise.

Today planes can follow prescribed routes with exacting precision. They are getting out of urban areas faster, which reduces overall noise.

"The objectives are the right ones: significant track-mile cost savings, lower fuel burn and greenhouse gases," says Southwest Airlines chief executive Gary Kelly. "There's no easy answer. We have to continue to work with local communities and the FAA."

In some cases, homes under the new flight paths have had their quiet shattered.

Phoenix offers the clearest example of the potential impact and potential gains from the new system so far. Jets taking off to the west from Sky Harbor International Airport almost always followed the Salt River bed out 9 miles before turning. If you were flying from Phoenix to New York, your plane would go 9 miles in the wrong direction. But on Sep. 18, 2014, the FAA implemented new routes that require planes heading north and east to start turning just 3 miles from the airport.

Steve Dreiseszun lives in a historic neighborhood near downtown Phoenix only about 3 miles from the end of the Sky Harbor runway. For decades, airplane noise hardly ever bothered him. But now jets fly over regularly, and just 2,000 feet or so above ground. When a British Airways Boeing 747 flew directly over his house one day at 1,800 feet overhead, there was so much noise he and his 9-year-old son thought the plane was going to crash.

"People made life investments in these homes based on the old routes," says Mr. Dreiseszun, a commercial photographer. The FAA, he says, has "closed their ears and gone tone-deaf on this issue."

Communities charge the FAA with bungling implementation of the new routes, thinking only of what's good for airlines and their passengers and not for people on the ground. They want environmental impact assessments. In an effort to speed up air-traffic modernization, Congress exempted the FAA in 2012 from full-blown environmental impact assessments if the FAA administrator determined new routes would reduce fuel consumption, emissions and noise, on a per-flight basis.

FAA administrator Michael Huerta says thousands of NextGen procedures have been implemented and only a few have been controversial. "Our mandate is safety and efficiency, but we are very conscious of the noise issue as it relates to the improvements we're making for the flying public," he says. The FAA, he added, is "learning from experience."

The city of Phoenix sued the FAA in June, saying the agency has been unwilling to make changes even when local officials proposed alternatives that they say would have reduced noise and retained 80% of desired fuel and efficiency benefits. The suit charges the FAA has created a negative impact on the Phoenix community without proper due process, notification and consideration.

Airport officials note that hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent in Phoenix on noise mitigation for homes under traditional flight paths. For decades the city has blocked development

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that wasn't compatible with the airport based on the traditional flight paths. Before the changes, the airport typically received about 200 noise complaints a year. Now it gets 2,000 to 4,000 each month.

Phoenix Sky Harbor says it got only a briefing, with the FAA's conclusion that there would be no noise impact. The FAA says it did consult with Sky Harbor before switching on new routes but has changed its approach.

"It's crazy," says Deborah Ostreicher, assistant director of the city's aviation department. "We're big fans of NextGen. We're just not big fans of how this was rolled out."

The FAA also says it is considering "tweaks" to routes in Phoenix, but the agency also says making major changes in routes is difficult because moving planes into different airspace can impact other routes. A major airport may have 20 arrival and departure routes, and one may be causing noise problems. Changing that one route could create conflicts with others.

Around Washington's Reagan National Airport, a new route in June intensified noise in Georgetown. Georgetown University and seven neighborhood associations sued. An FAA official notes that moving that route would put more noise over residents in Virginia.

The agency is stepping up its outreach in cities where changes are still under consideration, like Los Angeles and San Diego. The FAA official says the agency is providing easier-to-understand materials, such as overlaying proposed routes on maps so communities can see which homes will be impacted.

Kevin Terrell is a leader of MSP FairSkies, a group opposed to flight-path changes, and a management consultant who lives 6 miles from Minneapolis-Saint Paul International Airport. He argues the FAA is using antiquated assessments of noise impact that spread noise over a 24-hour cycle, thus diluting the impact of a string of planes every two or three minutes for several hours.

If the new flight paths reduce home values in quiet neighborhoods that suddenly had noise, Mr. Terrell argues that residents should be compensated. "It doesn't seem just," he says.

Planes began flying new routes in Minneapolis from 2012 to 2014. But the FAA suspended implementation of them after protests.

It says it has launched a 20-city survey of noise tolerance to see if its longtime noise-impact standard is still valid. The threshold, called 65 DNL, defines acceptable noise impact as day-night levels below an average of 65 decibels over 24 hours, weighted to count nighttime noise more heavily. Over the past two decades, airplanes have gotten much quieter. But residents may have also grown more sensitive.

That may be most apparent in Silicon Valley, where changes to arrival and departure routes earlier this year at airports in San Francisco and San Jose, Calif., have rattled many residents, some as far away as 60 miles from runways. One arrival route to San Francisco called SERFR ONE, for example, began March 5 and moved traffic 3 miles inland from a previous route that came over Big Sur and other less inhabited areas.

Michelle McAuliffe lives in Los Gatos and sees planes overhead for both San Francisco and San Jose. "Yesterday was a beautiful, sunny day and we were inside filing complaints nonstop," she said.

Arrival routes generate less noise than departure routes because aircraft engines are used less

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during descent. San Francisco arrivals fly over Ms. McAuliffe's home at least a mile above ground. Still, there are far more planes than she ever saw before. The noise has "ruined our peace," Ms. McAuliffe says. "The FAA says there was no significant impact and I don't know how they could think that."

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