

Periodic Report to the Palo Alto City Council  
from the  
Joint Community Relations Committee for the Palo Alto Airport  
17 February 2004

**Purpose**

The purpose of this report is to update the City Council on the recent activities of the Joint Community Relations Committee (JCRC).

**Joint Community Relations Committee**

The JCRC for the Palo Alto Airport was established by Santa Clara County Airports Commission and the City of Palo Alto to provide advice and recommendations to those bodies on the subject of aviation issues related to the airport. Specifically, the JCRC “initiates discussions, observations and investigations in order to **make recommendations on aviation or airport matters to the County and the City** “. It also “hears comments on airport or aviation matters from the public or other agencies or interest groups for consideration and possible recommendation to the County and City”. The JCRC also is tasked to “advance and promote the interests of aviation and to protect the general welfare of the people living and working near the airport”. The JCRC consists of 12 members of whom the County of Santa Clara appoints 6 and the City of Palo Alto appoints 6. We meet on the second Tuesday of each month at 8 AM at the Palo Alto Airport (usually at facilities provided by West Valley Flying Club.) These meetings are open to the public, however public attendance is infrequent (perhaps because we do not have a budget so there are no funds to provide for published notices of our meetings). The Palo Alto Airport JCRC is considered to be one of the most effective organizations of this type in the entire country. **The JCRC recommends that the City include the time and location of the JCRC’s meetings on the City’s web site and official calendars.**

**Historical Background**

It is interesting to note the history and geographical migration of the Palo Alto airport. In 1923 the first Palo Alto airfield was near Newell Road and Embarcadero. In 1929 Stanford University was designated by the Aeronautics Branch of the Department of Commerce as Aviation Ground School Number 1 and the airport then moved to a location near El Camino

on Stanford land (the current site of the football stadium parking lot, to be exact). In 1934 Palo Alto residents filed a lawsuit to force the airport to move off Stanford land because of the noise level. In 1935 the airport moved to the Baylands in what was then San Mateo County. This airport had two intersecting runways and accommodated aircraft as large as DC-3s. In 1954 the airport was moved further into the Baylands to its present location in order to make way for the new Palo Alto golf course and was down sized to one shorter runway. In 1963 the county boundaries changed and the airport was now back in Santa Clara County and Palo Alto. In 1967 the airport was leased to Santa Clara County which currently operates the Palo Alto, Reid Hillview and South County airports. A proposal to restore the airport to a two runway configuration was precluded by the adoption of the Palo Alto Baylands Master Plan which specified that, while the airport would remain as an essential component of the Baylands, only one runway would be allowed. The pad for the second runway was planted with native grass and left as open space. That second runway area has long ago reverted to a natural habitat that is heavily populated with Baylands wildlife.

### **Priorities of the JCRC**

The priorities of the JCRC are

- I- safety
- II - ensure that the airport is a good neighbor
- III - ensure that the airport provides services to the community

### **I-Safety**

With regard to the JCRC's first priority, safety, I am pleased to report that there were no aircraft life safety incidents or accidents at the Palo Alto Airport or in the surrounding communities during 2003.

#### **- Airport Activity**

Over the last twenty-five years the general level of activity at the airport, as measured by takeoffs and landings, has remained relatively constant. The single runway limitation established by the Baylands Master Plan has been and will continue to be the limiting condition of the level of activity at the airport, rather than the number of aircraft that are based at the

airport. When the Baylands Master Plan was adopted in 1977 the number of takeoffs and landings was 216,000 – higher than any of the last ten years.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Takeoffs and Landings</u>
1994	205,674
1995	184,285
1996	196,091
1997	208,086
1998	189,626
1999	205,594
2000	204,162
2001	209,709
2002	212,376
2003	214,038

## **II – Ensure that the Airport is a good neighbor**

### **- Noise Complaints**

Over the last nine years the number of noise complaints from citizens has also remained at relatively low levels.

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of Noise Complaints</u>
1995	8
1996	8
1997	23
1998	14
1999	25
2000	21
2001	15
2002	17
2003	14

### **- Mitigation of Noise**

The role of JCRC with regards to noise complaints exemplifies the manner in which we attempt to carry out our second priority, ensuring that the airport is a good neighbor. The very capable Santa Clara County Airports Division staff first processes each noise complaint and the majority of these noise complaints are resolved at that level. The airport staff

frequently receives complaints of low-level flights by aircraft that are flying through the area but not taking off or landing at Palo Alto airport such as traffic helicopters or military aircraft enroute to or from the Moffett Federal Airfield. The airport staff will frequently go to the neighborhood in question and monitor sound levels on the ground while being in radio contact with the Palo Alto tower in order to further pin down the nature of the problem. Those infrequent noise complaints that are not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant the airport staff level or which reoccur are generally referred to the JCRC for our action.

In 2002 a new Internet tool become available to provide concerned citizens with direct access to local aircraft flight information. This web site, [www4.passur.com/sjc.html](http://www4.passur.com/sjc.html), permits anyone with Internet access to observe, with a slight time delay for security purposes, all aircraft flying in the entire South Bay area. The altitude and flight track of each aircraft is shown and historical information can also be viewed. This data allows us to determine the flight path, altitude, origin and destination of aircraft involved in noise complaints.

In my role as Chair, I have elected to take the primary responsibility for responding to any complaints that have not been satisfactorily resolved at the staff level. My response is generally to contact the individual who submitted the complaint and to try to better understand the specific nature of their complaint. I also inform them of the general operating practices of the airport (approach and departure patterns, impact of low cloud ceilings etc.) so that they might better understand the reasons for the flying activity that may be causing them some concern. Individuals with Internet access are encouraged to use the new web site [www4.passur.com/sjc.html](http://www4.passur.com/sjc.html) to help them and the JCRC identify the specific altitude/origin/destination of aircraft that are creating objectionable noise levels.

If we are able to identify a specific airplane or pilot that is causing a particular problem, then I or another JCRC member will meet with the pilot and attempt to understand the reasons for that pilot's particular flight paths. Usually we can then devise an alternative pattern that causes less noise impact on the surrounding area. In some cases we will work with the very professional and helpful representatives of the FAA tower operation at Palo Alto Airport to revise their standard operating

procedures in order to minimize noise impacts - subject always to safety considerations. I provide individuals who have noise concerns with my home phone number and welcome phone calls from them at any time - including 2 o'clock in the morning on more than one occasion. In addition, I have met with individuals at their homes and in some cases with their neighbors to further explore the nature of their concerns and to try to be responsive to the issues that they have raised.

The number of noise complaints involving movements to or from the Palo Alto Airport is substantially lower (one complaint per 15,288 operations for 2003) than that which occurs with most similarly situated airports adjacent to or surrounded by residential areas. This is due to three factors:

First, the airport (having been relocated three times) is in a very fortunate location immediately adjacent to the Baylands that allows us to conduct a majority of our operations over unpopulated areas (I hasten to add that by unpopulated I mean without human population; the Baylands Naturalist has made us all acutely aware of the wonderful and diverse wildlife populations in this area - on which we also attempt to minimize any negative impact),

Second, the cooperation of the pilots operating from the Palo Alto Airport by engaging in both noise avoidance flight patterns and engine operations, and

Third, the very effective work of the airport, FAA staff, and the JCRC.

This superb record does not in any way minimize the importance of continued vigilance in this area and our responsibility to ensure that the airport continues to be a good neighbor.

**- Commitment to the Bayland Habitat**

The JCRC's second priority, that the airport be a good neighbor, carries a very special responsibility with regards to the Baylands which we share both with a number of other activities and with some important species of plants and wildlife. The Baylands areas are ones that we all enjoy and

they are a very rich environmental treasure that must not and will not be jeopardized by inappropriate activity and/or construction at the airport. We work closely with the Baylands Naturalist to monitor the impact of the new lighting, to reduce or eliminate any use of poisons/pesticides on the airport in order to eliminate this hazard to the Baylands wildlife and, when possible, to adjust flight operations so as to minimize adverse impact on the Baylands habitat.

**- Airport Security**

During 2003 the airport community has worked with the AOPA (a national aviation association that has worked closely with the Department of Homeland Security to develop the Airport Watch Program), the Palo Alto Airport Association, the Palo Alto Police Department and the airport staff to ensure that appropriate security measures are in place to minimize the possibility of any inappropriate use of general aviation aircraft. These measures included gated access, locks on aircraft and hangers and an Airport Watch program.

**III -Ensure that the Airport provides services to the community**

**- Commercial and Tax Benefits To The City**

It is important to recognize that the Palo Alto Airport is both a commercial and a recreational facility. As a commercial (both airport-based businesses and airport based business pilots) facility the airport provides important tax revenues and commercial activities for the city of Palo Alto at virtually no cost to the City. In fact, the City netted over \$220,000 in taxes from on-airport businesses and on aircraft based at the airport in FY 02-03. Taxes from nearby airport related businesses increase this amount significantly. The airport is also an important link in the Bay Area transportation system, particularly in the event of a major earthquake, which may seriously disrupt surface transportation. As a recreational site, the airport provides recreational opportunities for a large number of private pilots. The airport provides an easily accessible point of entry for young and often underprivileged people in the surrounding communities who are considering careers in aviation. During 2003 the airport supported hundreds of Life Flight and Angel Flights.

### **- Airport Day**

In 2004 the airport community will be reviving a past practice of having an Airport Day to open the airport to the community and to provide a broad range of educational displays. This event will be held on September 12 and will be coordinated with the City staff. We hope to utilize this event not only to bring interested people to the airport but also to help introduce them to the many other recreational facilities available in the Palo Alto Baylands.

### **Current Challenges**

**-County Master Plan and The Palo Alto Baylands Master Plan**  
Looking forward, the JCRC has two very important challenges. The first is to continue the constructive dialogue on the careful integration of the Airports Master Plan currently being developed by Santa Clara County with the existing Palo Alto Baylands Master Plan. The County Plan will recommend a number of improvements for the Palo Alto Airport – such as relocating the existing terminal building from its present location, which is in the airport safety zone. This relocation is already included in the Baylands Master Plan. The JCRC has recommended to the County and its consultants that the objective should be to develop plans for the airport that carefully incorporate the airport into the other Baylands activities. For example, the required relocation of the terminal building offers us the possibility of creating a Baylands Welcoming Center that would serve the needs of all Baylands users. In addition, berming along Embarcadero in conjunction with the proposed Baylands Welcoming Center could visually and acoustically screen the pedestrian, bicycle and automotive entrances to the Baylands from the airport. Better sound insulation at the Baylands Interpretative Center is necessary to permit instructional activities at the Center to proceed without interruption by aircraft noise. The roofs of aircraft hangars also offer an excellent opportunity for the creation of a large solar array to provide electricity to the City of Palo Alto without creating any new impermeable surfaces. The County is also considering in its Airports Master Planning process other important improvements at the airport which deserve careful consideration as well as close scrutiny.

In 2003 the JCRC commissioned a community outreach effort regarding the update of the Airports Master Plan and the integration of that Master Plan with the Baylands Master Plan by a Public Policy Fellow from the Haas

Center for Public Service at Stanford. The report on this effort conducted by S. Daisy Pistey-Lyhne is attached. Ms. Pistey-Lyhne's report was produced as a totally independent effort and was not edited or reviewed by others prior to its submission. The JCRC hopes that this extensive review of community opinions will be an important resource for both the County and City staffs as well as the public and will facilitate a constructive planning process.

The JCRC's hope is that the contemplated changes at the airport will be planned and executed in a manner that will make the Palo Alto Airport one of the most environmentally sensitive and attractive airports in the entire country.

### **Current Challenges**

#### **-Airport Lease**

The second challenge is with regard to the current airport lease. The current lease of the airport land by the City to the County expires in 2017. While 2017 may seem to be a long way off, the remaining term on the current lease is too short to encourage any privately funded upgrades or improvements at the airport by the current tenants. As noted above, the JCRC is strongly supportive of replacing the current temporary structure that serves as an airport terminal building with a new structure designed to be a Baylands Welcoming Center that would serve all of the users of the Baylands. Private financing for such a facility cannot be obtained as long as the expiration of the ground lease is only 13 years away. We urge the City and The County to either extend the current lease or to provide some mechanism for post 2017 land use that would permit the private financing of such improvements and new facilities.

**The JCRC recommends that the Council direct staff to report to you in the near future on how the lease extension should be handled.**

### **Current Challenges**

#### **-The Dikes**

Another issue that deserves mention is the importance of properly maintaining the dikes that surround the airport on the creek and Bay sides. During the extremely high tides in December of 2003 these dikes were breached in two locations. Fortunately, the time period during which

the tide levels exceed the height of the dike in these two places was brief and only small amounts of water crossed over the dikes and only a small amount of damage was done to the dikes. These intrusions probably occurred because of long term subsidence of the dikes which was most pronounced at these two locations.

Palo Alto's Bayland Naturalist, Deborah Bartens alerted the airport community to the potential for this event and mobilized the City's response. Deborah's alert and her response coordination helped prevent what could have been a much more serious problem. We wish to commend Ms. Bartens for this effort as well as her continued input to and support of the work of the JCRC. Looking forward, it is clear that the dikes will continue to subside and efforts will need to be made by the City to routinely maintain these dikes in order to prevent serious flooding and extensive property loss at the airport and to the Baylands Interpretative Center access and pathways.





The JCRC recommends that the Council ask staff to report on the plans and responsibilities for the maintenance of the dikes adjacent to the airport.

## **Thank You's**

Special thanks are due to Mrs. Pat Roy. Pat and her late husband, Laurence, have been involved with the Palo Alto Airport for decades and have contributed in many ways to the airport's success and well being. The Roys have operated Roy Aero, a fix based operation providing hangers, fuel and rental space for commercial airport related activities, for over 24 years. They have also been strong supporters of improving the airport. When the runway was repaved in 2002, Pat Roy paid for a set of precision landing lights on runway 13 that had not been included in the budget for the project but which provide an important safety feature. And in 2003 Pat Roy made a very substantial donation to the City to pay for the soundproofing of the Baylands Interpretative Center. Because the Interpretative Center lies under the landing pattern at the airport aircraft noise often intrudes on classes and other activities at the Center. Pat realized that in the current economic situation it was highly unlikely that City funds would be available for this project so she elected to fund this effort in memory of her husband.

I would also like to give recognition to my colleagues who serve on the JCRC (with Curt Weil having served the longest – since 1989), the City and County employees who work with the JCRC, and in particular Bill Fellman, Carl Honaker, Deborah Bartens and Larry Feldman. Bob Lenox, who serves on both the JCRC and the Santa Clara County Airports Commission and also serves as the AOPA's Airport Support Network Volunteer for the Palo Alto Airport, continues to be the airport's number one "networker". Also, Pat Roy and the West Valley Flying Club have been continuing sources of energy and support for our efforts. I also want to thank each of the concerned citizens who have taken the time to bring their concerns regarding airport operations to the JCRC.

### Summary of Recommendations

The JCRC recommends that the City include the time and location of the JCRC's meetings on the City's web site and official calendars.

The JCRC recommends that the Council direct staff to report to you in the near future on how the lease extension should be handled.

The JCRC recommends that the Council ask staff to report on the plans and responsibilities for the maintenance of the dikes adjacent to the airport.

### Guidance to JCRC from the City Council

We welcome your suggestions as to any modifications that we might make in either our membership or procedures to better carry out the functions of this committee.

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Attachment: Report on Community Outreach Effort regarding the  
Palo Alto Airport Master Plan Update  
Prepared by: S. Daisy Pistey-Lyhne