

Periodic Report to the Palo Alto City Council  
from the  
Joint Community Relations Committee for the Palo Alto Airport  
11 July 2005

**Purpose**

This report updates the City Council on the recent activities of the Joint Community Relations Committee (JCRC). In view of the Council's 11 July agenda item on the Future of the Palo Alto Airport, during which the JCRC will make a special report, this report will be included in the Council's packet but will not be presented verbally.

Joint Community Relations Committee

The Santa Clara County Airports Commission established the JCRC for the Palo Alto Airport in 1987 to provide advice and recommendations on the subject of aviation issues related to 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. 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. We meet on the second Tuesday of each month at 8 AM at the Palo Alto Airport (usually at facilities provided by the 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 and include a link to the JCRC's web site

([http://www.zachary.com/s/pao\\_jcrc](http://www.zachary.com/s/pao_jcrc)) on the City's web site.

Historical Background

The history and geographical migration of the Palo Alto airport are noteworthy. In the early 1900's the Palo Alto City Council, under the leadership of Mayor Cooley, endorsed Palo Alto becoming a "Red Dot on

the aviation maps” by having its own airport. In 1923 the first Palo Alto airfield was situated 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). 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. The original Baylands airport was formally opened 70 years ago this month. 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 – to ensure that the airport is a good neighbor, and
- III – to 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 2004.

II – Ensure that the Airport is a good neighbor

- Airport Activity

Over the last twenty-five years the 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 during any of the last eleven 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
2004	191,727

- Noise Complaints

Over the last ten years the number of noise complaints from citizens has remained at remarkably 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
2004	3

The number of noise complaints involving movements to or from the Palo Alto Airport is lower (one complaint per 63,909 operations for 2004 – a new record) than that which occurs with any similar airport adjacent to or surrounded by residential areas. An airport noise expert commented “this is the lowest number of complaints per operations I have EVER heard of for any size airport.” 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 minimize the importance of continued vigilance in this area and our responsibility to ensure that the airport continues to be a good neighbor. Rather, it demonstrates the viability and success of the current management approach.

- Noise Mitigation

The role of the JCRC regarding noise complaints exemplifies how 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 surface sound levels while being in radio contact with the Palo Alto tower in order to further identify the nature of the problem. Those infrequent noise complaints that are not resolved to the satisfaction of the complainant at the airport staff level or which reoccur are generally referred to the JCRC for our action.

In 2002 a new Internet tool become available that provides 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 civilian aircraft flying in the entire South Bay area. The altitude and flight track of each aircraft is graphically presented and historical information can also be viewed. This tool allows us to accurately determine the flight path, altitude, origin and destination of most of the 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 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 to help 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 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 AM 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.

#### - Commitment to the Baylands Habitat

The JCRC's second priority, that the airport be a good neighbor, carries a very special responsibility regarding the Baylands. The Airport shares the Baylands both with a number of other activities and with some important species of plants and wildlife. The Palo Alto Baylands areas are a very rich environmental treasure ones that we all enjoy. We must not and will not jeopardize the Baylands 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. During 2004 the installation of soundproofing and double glazed windows (donated by Pat Roy of Roy Aero) in the Lucy Evans Baylands Nature Preserve Interpretive Center dramatically reduced the impact of aircraft noise on this important educational facility.

#### - Airport Security

During 2004 the airport community has continued to work with the Airplane Owners and Pilots Association (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 prevent inappropriate use of general aviation aircraft. These measures included gated access, locks on aircraft and hangars and an Airport Watch program. The aborted 2005 FAA grant application would have provided for substantial security upgrades.

### III -Ensure that the Airport provides services to the Community

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

The Palo Alto Airport is both a commercial and a recreational facility. As a commercial facility (both airport-based businesses and airport based business pilots) 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 and the Palo Alto School District netted over \$400,000 in taxes from on-airport businesses and from aircraft based at the airport in FY 03-04. Taxes from nearby airport related businesses increase this amount significantly. The Airport is also an important component 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. There were also hundreds of Angel Flights (private pilots donating their time and aircraft to transport non-critically ill patients for medical care traveling to Palo Alto medical facilities) via the Palo Alto Airport in 2004.

- Serve as an aviation transportation site

An important measure of the economic and commercial importance of a general aviation (GA) airport is the number of itinerant operations (excludes scheduled airline flights and flights which remain in the traffic pattern at an airport) that it has each year. In 2003 Palo Alto, with 84,079 such flights, was the 48<sup>th</sup> busiest GA in the country. And in 2004, with 74,780 itinerant flights, Palo Alto was the 61<sup>st</sup> busiest GA airport in the country (just ahead of Dulles International Airport, which had 74,689 itinerant flights) and with only three noise complaints!

- Public Safety Flights

Hundreds of public safety flights occur at the Palo Alto Airport every year. These range from the almost daily medical evacuation/Lifeflight helicopter operations to and from Stanford hospital, to fixed wing and rotary wing air ambulance flights, and Civil Air Patrol flights.

- Airport Day

In 2004 the Airport community revived 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 was held on September 12 with more than 4000 people in attendance. This event brought interested people to the Airport and also introduced them to the many other recreational facilities available in the Palo Alto Baylands. We will repeat this event on 11 September 2005 and we invite all of you and the entire Palo Alto community to attend.

-The Dikes

During 2004 we experienced the second consecutive year of high winter tides that overflowed the dikes that protect the Airport. Thanks to well-coordinated actions by the City, County and Water District it appears that the necessary repairs will be completed before the 2005 high winter tides.

The JCRC thanks all of those who contributed to the dike repair effort for their diligence and commitment.

## Current Challenges

-County Airports Master Plan and the Palo Alto Baylands Master Plan and Comprehensive Plan

We are just beginning a constructive dialogue on the careful integration of the County's Airports Master Plan, being developed by Santa Clara County, with the existing Palo Alto Baylands Master Plan and Comprehensive Plan. The County's Plan for the Palo Alto Airport will be constrained by the facts that the County is a lessee rather than the long term owner of the Airport and that the County only has 12 years remaining on its lease. Since the County does not operate most of the revenue generating activities at the Airport, their Plan will be also constrained to a narrower economic base. The City of Palo Alto, as the owner of the Airport, can and should take a much longer time perspective and a broader economic perspective.

The County Plan will probably recommend various 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 pedestrian, bicycle and automotive entrances to the Baylands from the Airport. The roofs of aircraft hangars also offer an excellent opportunity to host a large solar array to provide zero emission electricity to the City of Palo Alto without creating new impermeable surfaces. The County is also considering in its Airports Master Planning process other important improvements at the airport which deserve careful consideration and close scrutiny.

You are encouraged to read the 2003 JCRC Community Outreach Report regarding Update to KPAO Master Planning which is available on the JCRC web site: [http://www.zachary.com/s/pao\\_jcrc](http://www.zachary.com/s/pao_jcrc)

The JCRC recommends that improvements at the airport be planned and implemented in a manner that will make the Palo Alto Airport one of the most environmentally sensitive, visually attractive and economically successful general aviation airports in the Nation.

#### -Airport Continuity

The second challenge is with the current ambiguity of the City's long-term commitment to the Airport. 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 facilitate any Federal funding or to justify any privately funded upgrades or improvements at the Airport by the 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 Baylands users. Financing for such a facility cannot be obtained as long as the expiration of the ground lease is only 12 years away. Applications for readily available Federal grants for maintenance and improvements also require a longer time horizon than the remaining 12 years.

The JCRC recommends that the City either extends the current lease or provides some other mechanism for post 2017 airport continuity that would permit both Federal and private financing of improvements and new facilities.

## Thank You's

In 2003 Pat Roy made a substantial donation to the City to pay for the soundproofing of the Baylands Interpretative Center. Because the Interpretative Center lies under the Airport's landing pattern 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 funded this effort in memory of her husband. That work was completed in 2004.

Also deserving of recognition are 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. A special thanks goes to Frank Benest, the City Manager, for stimulating the current essential and overdue discussion on the Future of the Palo Alto Airport and to the City Council for their unanimous approval of Council Members Kleinberg's and Ojakian's motion to agendize this subject.

## Summary of Recommendations

The JCRC recommends that the City either extends the current lease or provides some other mechanism for post 2017 airport continuity that would permit both Federal and private financing of improvements and new facilities.

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### 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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