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Phila. airport starts new routes today

FAA go-ahead comes despite injunctions filed by Del. residents, others about noise

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Planes will begin flying new routes out of Philadelphia International Airport today.

The Federal Aviation Administration will implement the first stage of its controversial airspace redesign plan at the Philadelphia and Newark, N.J., airports, despite injunctions filed on behalf of Delaware, Pennsylvania and New Jersey residents, and despite safety concerns from air traffic controllers.

Today's implementation, which is facing numerous legal challenges, is happening two days later than planned but ahead of a governmental audit not due until summer.

Critics say the plan will increase noise and pollution, and do nothing to relieve the Northeast's record airline delays.

But the FAA says the new procedures -- to be used during peak departure times, 9 to 11 a.m. and 2 to 7 p.m., and when weather or other conditions cause delays -- will help congestion. Spokesman Jim Peters said the changes are safe, and any assertions to the contrary are untrue.

This week, nine Delaware civic associations; the villages of Arden, Ardentown and Ardencroft; state Sen. Catherine A. Cloutier, R-Heatherbrooke; and two residents filed a petition in the U.S. District Court of Appeals in D.C. to stop the FAA from moving forward with altering flight paths. Delaware County, Pa., and Elizabeth, N.J., also have filed injunctions.

Those injunctions are in addition to the dozen or so petitions filed by cities, counties and groups appealing the FAA's record of decision.

"No stay has been issued, and that's what it would take" to halt implementation, said FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown.

She would not comment on the pending litigation.

Stephen Donato, a Brandywine Hundred resident and one of the individuals named in the petition against the FAA, said he hoped filing the injunction would have been enough.

"You'd think the FAA would do the right thing and wait until it's heard by a judge," he said.

In September, the FAA announced new flight paths for the airspace in the busy Northeast corridor, which includes airports in Philadelphia, New York and New Jersey.

By 2011, the FAA estimates, the changes should shave annual delays by 12 million minutes, reduce airline operating costs by \$248 million a year, and reduce carbon dioxide by burning 23 million fewer gallons of fuel annually.

'Flawed' plan alleged

The Government Accountability Office, the investigative arm of Congress, is auditing the FAA's airspace redesign plan, and its findings are expected next summer.

U.S. Reps. Rob Andrews, D-N.J., and Joe Sestak, D-Pa., have said they believe the FAA is rushing its "flawed" plan because the agency fears a "scathing" report from the GAO.

Currently, about 65 percent of Philadelphia air traffic flies over Delaware each year.

In October, flights at Philadelphia International Airport were on time only 69.35 percent of the time, down from the 71.35 percent on-time arrival rate in October 2006.

As of today, air traffic controllers can begin sending departing planes out on two new routes, one that heads south and another to the west, over New Castle County. An existing westward flight path already goes over northern Delaware. A fourth southern route will be put in place later.

'Lets us get more planes out'

By the time the departing planes are over Delaware, they typically are at an altitude of at least 3,000 feet, Peters.

The "fanned" departures mean that because planes are headed out at different angles, they won't require the same distance of separation needed when aircraft fly in a straight line, helping to reduce delays, Brown said.

"It's a tool that lets us get more planes out," she said.

The additional paths won't have to be used around the clock, Brown said, but are there as an option when the airport is congested, such as during busy times of the day, or during bad weather.

Don Chapman, president of the Philadelphia chapter of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, which is involved in a labor dispute with the FAA, said he is not confident all the controllers know what they're supposed to be doing today. Since the FAA began briefing controllers about two weeks ago, the operating times and one departure heading have changed, he said.

The chain of command

"What they were trained on isn't what's going to be implemented, so the training is fully inadequate," Chapman said.

The main problem, he said, is that all the changes are on the backs of the controllers, and the change in routes isn't being disseminated to pilots.

Typically, pilots get clearance from controllers, and pilots will continue to receive the same navigational headings as always, he said. But starting today, during peak traffic hours, air traffic controllers will have to verbally override that clearance and give pilots the new route information.

"If you're doing that 1,500 times a day, the odds of something being miscommunicated or misheard grow exponentially, and that's where the danger is," Chapman said. "When you start requiring all this verbal communication, that's when you start asking for trouble."

The FAA alerted pilots to the changes by sending airlines a letter about them Friday. The procedures are safe, Peters said, and controllers won't be doing anything they don't do now.

"Every day at Philadelphia International Airport, our controllers issue headings to aircraft," he said. "That is a normal job duty for a controller."

Differing views

The bottom line, he said, is the new procedures are safe, and passengers flying out of Philadelphia today won't notice a difference.

"Other than if someone is outside and they've never seen aircraft overfly their homes, people on these aircraft will not know anything

is different," Peters said.

Donato, who maintains an anti-Philadelphia airport noise Web site, said the FAA's plan will only make things worse, arguing that the volume of air traffic over Delaware will increase if the redesign is implemented.

"We've got to stop this airspace redesign because it's key to them expanding that airport," he said. "Their goal is to increase capacity, and they're going to do whatever they can. They're not going to cap capacity at Philadelphia unless we file another lawsuit."

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