

Howard pushing FAA to address 'unacceptable' noise levels

BWI airport's flight path changes rankle neighbors

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When Robyn Winder moved to her single family house in Howard County nearly 24 years ago, she rarely remembered Baltimore/Washington International Thurgood Marshall Airport was about three miles away.

But within the last year, the incessant, uninterrupted presence of low-flying planes in her neighborhood is a constant reminder of the airport's looming presence.

Now, she's up when the airplanes are.

"I'm 63 and I'm not deaf yet," Winder said. "Maybe that's a blessing."

Months of pushback from residents in Columbia, Elkridge and Hanover has prompted local officials to push the Federal Aviation Administration to take action against "unacceptable" noise caused by changes in flight patterns after the rollout of Next Gen, a new \$40 billion system to modernize the national air-traffic control system.

"We can no longer wait for the slow exchange of letters and emails, as immediate action is required," wrote County

Executive Allan Kittleman, County Council Chairman Calvin Ball and Councilman Jon Weinstein in a May 24 letter to the FAA, which plans to meet with local and state officials on July 12.

The FAA says the new system — which has drawn frustration from Congress — is a more sophisticated, modern method to manage air traffic, curbing carbon emission, speeding up departures and saving \$14.3 billion in fuel costs by 2030.

But communities across the country have sounded off against Next Gen for sparking an old problem in new areas where airport noise was not previously a significant concern.

"It's like living in a combat zone that isn't supposed to exist," said Winder. "If we logged complaints, we would literally have to sit down on the computer or telephone all day, for hour after hour, documenting plane after plane."

A study by the National Academies of Sciences criticized the program for failing to meet public expectations about the program's original mission to revolutionize air traffic management.

At BWI, noise complaints more than doubled over the last two years. The airport received 835 calls in 2014 and more than 1,800 calls last year, according to Jonathan Dean, the airport's communications manager.

Dean said airport construction partly explains the increase it diverts airline traffic to another runway, concentrating noise in certain communities.

Before buying her house in Elkridge, Barbara Dreckert parked in front of the land with her late husband, Gerry, to listen.

The couple knew the airport was nearby.

"We thought, OK, this is good," said Dreckert. "We absolutely didn't sign up for this. The community has been fighting the MAA and FAA for months. It's kind of living like in a thunderstorm. You know you'll be OK, but you can't concentrate, you can't sleep and you don't know when the next boom is coming."

According to correspondence between state and local elected officials, the FAA asserted the noise was associated with major construction at the airport. All major construction was completed in November.

Agency officials conducted environmental and noise studies where new flight paths were instituted. But the MAA said the FAA's departure procedures for planes flying below 3,000 feet since last May are different from the procedures the state prepared and the FAA approved.

The MAA also said the FAA inaccurately stated construction at BWI caused the increase in noise complaints, ac-

ording to an April letter to the FAA. Now, the MAA wants the federal flight paths to revert to old traffic patterns.

Weinstein said residents pushed the MAA to concede changes in flight paths caused by Next Gen contributed to increased noise levels.

"At this point, I want a commitment from the FAA to address this problem or revert back to the old routes in place," said Weinstein. Ball also called on the FAA to return to original flight paths and conduct a "true study" of communities impacted by flights below 3,000 feet.

"I'm disappointed we have not been able to reach a mutual solution. We cannot piecemeal a resolution anymore," wrote Ball in a prepared statement.

Kittleman said it was unclear if Next-Gen spurred noise complaints, which he praised for reducing emissions.

For Winder, the BWI noise issue is not like other noise issues.

"You can't just say well, you live near an airport and you should expect noise," she said. "That's why they have noise zones. We never expected this problem. It simply didn't exist."

The FAA did not directly respond to questions about the implementation of NextGen, adding it agreed to meet privately with elected officials to address concerns raised in the letter.