

FAA abandons plans to reroute flight patterns over Berkeley

The announcement came during a public meeting about Oakland and San Francisco airport noise.

By Laura Casey, April 21, 2021, 10:08 p.m.



The FAA is shelving plans to change flight patterns over Berkeley.
Credit: [Kevin Woblick/Unsplash](#)

Berkeley officials celebrated Wednesday night after a Federal Aviation Administration official announced at a public meeting about Oakland and San Francisco airport noise that the FAA is shelving plans to change flight patterns that would have directed airplanes into the city's flattest, most diverse neighborhoods.

Raquel Girvin, a regional administrator for the FAA, told attendees during a Zoom meeting, "Ultimately, we were able to find a safety solution that does not involve changing the current routes." She declined to elaborate.

"It's a win," said District 3 City Councilmember Ben Bartlett. "I'm amazed."

The push to oppose the plans was led by Bartlett, who heard less than a week ago about the proposed change to take more flights off paths in the Oakland hills and drop them into the Berkeley, Albany, El Cerrito and Richmond flatlands.

"I didn't even know about this until a constituent accosted me on the street and said, 'Why are you allowing the FAA to do this?'" he said. Berkeley residents gathered to develop a petition in opposition to the changes and got 1,000 signatures in about four days. The City Council voted Tuesday night to write a letter to the FAA to oppose more planes in sensitive neighborhoods.

Berkeley has toxic soil, polluting industrial sites, and Interstate 80 emissions waft through the city, creating "terrible health outcomes" for everyone but especially for people of color who have been victims of redlining and gentrification that pushes them into more industrial, polluted areas of the city, Bartlett said. For over a decade, city leaders have been trying to repair the environment in Berkeley for a while, even creating the 2018 Health Status Report to keep citizens aware of realities in the area and movement to try to clean up the city, he said.

Bartlett said the FAA's new plans would have reversed their progress.

Tempers flared in the Oakland hills in 2016 when the FAA proposed changing flight routes to fly over their otherwise quiet neighborhoods like Montclair, which ended up happening.

The problem of increased jet noise all over the country has to do with the FAA new NextGen program, rolled out in 2014, which uses highly precise GPS technology to optimize airspace to reduce delays, increase airport capacity, save time and fuel costs and free up new airspace for commercial and military drones. The result

is airplanes are directed by the FAA to be funneled into narrower corridors and fly lower.

On the Berkeley success, Bartlett considers the quick opposition by residents and the council the avenue to the win, as was the city's outreach to other stakeholders.

"We hit all the angles," he said. "I was hitting these politicians on Twitter. I was calling D.C. I was on it. I figured it was a long shot that we could move them because they are so far above us in the food chain, but we had to try."

He added: "That's the moral of the story; no matter how high the odds are, you can try. As a parent raising kids here, I am just extraordinarily relieved and thankful."

Martine Kraus, a resident of North Berkeley, thanked the FAA official who announced the plans at the meeting. "I don't think that moving the problem to a different part of the community is a solution, and I don't know anyone in Berkeley that would support that. It's unjust to be exposed to this on a daily basis and incessantly."

Richmond residents also expressed relief that the plan was not going forward.

"I am greatly pleased that they have abandoned this additional approach," Richmond activist Lori Hart said. "I am really hoping that since it is going to be abandoned now, it will remain abandoned, and we won't have to revisit it soon. The city of Richmond has enough pollution and pollution from refineries, and we're glad to know we won't have additional trauma to our citizens."

Still, there are some continually upset citizens in the Oakland hills, and those at the meeting said if the flight paths that disturb them all hours of the day, nearly every 10 to 30 minutes, can't be moved, the path should at least be widened so that a greater amount of citizens share the burden of the noise and pollution.

Susan Stephenson of Oakland said 100 Oakland hills residents signed a petition to widen the flight path and she was "very disturbed" to hear that the FAA official announced that all proposed changes are being dropped.

"I am surprised to hear that it is moot already," she said, adding that the noise is "relentless" and "nothing less than debilitating."

Yet Jeff Butler of Richmond's Clean and Quiet Skies group said that moving the flights would also mean the pollution and noise would affect a larger population.

"If the flights were to be moved from the hills into the flats, it would more than double the population being exposed and just for the population alone, this would be unfair," he said.

Bartlett said that if the issue needs to be revisited, the FAA should consider flying 3 miles into the East Bay – into East Bay Regional Parks land. He knows there would be environmental opposition to that but said the hills and the trees could absorb the noise and pollution more than the schoolchildren and seniors, who are at a higher risk of developing asthma and heart conditions.