

N.Y. / REGION

Deal Restricts Tourist Helicopter Flights Over New York

By MATT A.V. CHABAN JAN. 31, 2016

After decades of complaints about noise and air pollution from the tens of thousands of tourist helicopter flights that circle Manhattan each year, New York City announced a deal on Sunday that would cut their number in half by January 2017.

In addition, the helicopters, as familiar a sight on the city's waterfront as sea gulls and joggers, will not fly on Sundays starting April 1 and will be banned from flying over Governors Island and Staten Island. In waterfront parks across the city, activists have measured noise readings in excess of 75 decibels, louder than a vacuum cleaner.

The agreement, announced by Mayor Bill de Blasio, was intended to address the complaints while trying to keep aloft a multimillion-dollar industry. Last year, more than 59,000 flights took off from Pier 6 near the Battery, the only heliport that provides the tours.



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.@nicolegelinas @Adrian_Benepe My readings on Gov Is. last June routinely passed 70 dBA (like 50 ft from freeway). pic.twitter.com/LBUCFFUIq3

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The de Blasio administration hailed the move as a way to improve the quality of life for New Yorkers while protecting an industry that helps pay for operations at the Pier 6 heliport through \$2.9 million in rent.

“Everyone gave a little to get to this outcome, but the solution will mean a more livable city for everyone,” Mayor de Blasio, a Democrat, said in a statement.

Yet there are many who believe that even one tourist helicopter is too many.

“I’m happy there’s finally movement on the issue, but I have serious doubts that the 50 percent will be enough,” Representative [Jerrold Nadler](#), a Democrat who represents the West Side of Manhattan and parts of Brooklyn, said. Like many elected officials, Mr. Nadler has been campaigning for an all-out ban on the helicopters dating to the administration of Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani, something he still believes is the best course of action.

According to the agreement, tour operators would have to reduce the number of flights by 20 percent by June, and the following month, they would be required to submit monthly reports tracking flight routes, including whether any helicopters stray too close to land. The aircraft are allowed only over the harbor and Hudson River as far north as the George Washington Bridge. A third-party monitor, paid for by the operators, would also conduct field observations.

Currently, 219 people are employed in the industry, according to the city’s Economic Development Corporation, including 50 at the Pier 6 heliport, which is owned by the city and operated by Saker Aviation. The tours used to take off from the city’s two other heliports, at East 34th Street and West 30th Street, but they were all moved downtown by 2010 after neighborhood opposition.

Liberty Helicopters, of Kearny, N.J., has been ferrying tourists around the city for 29 years, employs 100 people and flies 10 helicopters in the summer season, said Chris Vellios, the chief operating officer. “We’re going to have to roll up our sleeves and make these reductions work, but it’s better than an outright ban, which the City Council had been considering,” Mr. Vellios said.

Liberty spent \$120,000 lobbying the mayor’s office and the Economic Development Corporation last year, and the Helicopter Tourism & Jobs Council, based in Scottsdale, Ariz., spent \$85,000 on lobbying.

Liberty’s tours charge passengers \$150 for 15 minutes and \$225 for 20 minutes, and the helicopters can seat up to six people (less, depending on weight).

The trips loop along the Brooklyn waterfront, past Governors Island to Red Hook, across to the Statue of Liberty, and then up the Hudson River, leaving every

few minutes. Because they do a loop, residents say that it seems as if twice as many helicopters are buzzing by their homes.

“It’s a compromised compromise,” John Dellaportas, the president of the Stop the Chop NYNJ and a resident of Battery Park City, said. “So instead of a flight every two minutes, it will be one every four minutes.”

On Sunday afternoon, the heliport was not quite so busy, with tours leaving every five to 10 minutes. A roar would overtake the promenade, sending ripples across the water.

Athenie Brake was visiting for the weekend from Alberta, Canada, and had just taken her father, Wayne, out for a birthday tour. She took her mother last year, as well.

“If this isn’t offered on Sundays, we won’t be able to take a trip,” she said. “We just came down for the weekend, and if they don’t offer it, we won’t get the chance.”

Josep Genebriera and Nicholas Eklund, from Jacksonville, Fla., said a Sunday ban would have gotten in the way of a birthday surprise Mr. Genebriera had planned. “But I guess I could have just booked it for yesterday,” Mr. Genebriera said.

Air pollution is another concern. Adrian Benepe, the parks commissioner under Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, was co-author of an opinion article that was published over the weekend in The New York Times denouncing the growth of helicopter flights at the same time the city had begun to reclaim its waterfront for recreational space. Mr. Benepe and Merritt Birnbaum, executive director of Governors Island Alliance, wrote that certain helicopters generate 950 pounds of carbon dioxide per hour, more than 42 times the emissions of the average car.

Mitchell L. Moss, the director of the Rudin Center for Transportation, conducted a study on the city’s heliports in 2012 and found that they had benefits for industries as varied as emergency management and traffic engineering. He warned that banishing tourism flights from the city could drive them to New Jersey, where City Hall would have less sway over routes and hours of operation.

One reform that Gale Brewer, the Manhattan borough president, wants to see is identification on the bottom of each helicopter. “I have constituents who are out there with binoculars, trying to figure out who’s buzzing them all the time,” she said.

Among them is Ed Windels, a composer who lives on Riverside Drive and 103rd Street. While the helicopters have made working on music challenging, they have allowed Mr. Windels to forgo an alarm clock. “It starts at 6:30, every morning, on the dot,” he said, “though that’s not exactly how you want to be woken up, by having your entire building shaking.”

Tatiana Schlossberg contributed reporting.

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