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As Season Nears, Helicopter Issue Roils Hamptons

Town leaders weigh new regulations on traffic at East Hampton's airport



Helicopter takeoffs and landings at the East Hampton airport totaled about 4,000 in 2014, officials said. *PHOTO: KEVIN HAGEN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **MICHAEL RUIZ**

Updated March 23, 2015 9:57 p.m. ET

Emotion-charged and sometimes even lyrical language has long been the order of the day when it comes to the well-attended public meetings about helicopter flights over the Hamptons, on the East End of Long Island.

“I always felt...I could come home and look up to the sky into infinity,” said Anne Mittendorf, 66 years old, whose home is under a flight path in the East Hampton hamlet of Springs. “When those aircraft started coming, it was just a cosmic joke.”

Helicopter takeoffs and landings at the East Hampton airport totaled about 4,000 in 2014, a 40% increase from 2013, officials said. The Southampton heliport had 894 landings in 2014, down from 915 in 2013, officials said. The helicopter issue pits residents who complain about noise and summer visitors who take to the air to avoid road traffic, and for a long time it has seemed unsolvable.

This year may be different. On Jan. 1, as an agreement with Federal Aviation Administration expired, East Hampton gained the power to regulate traffic at its airport for the first time in decades, said Councilwoman Kathee Burke-Gonzalez.

Town leaders say they want new regulations in place by Memorial Day, the unofficial opening of the summer season in the Hamptons. Debate is centering on four options laid out by a consultant to the town. If the board approves restrictions, a court fight is expected.

“People find our town desirable because of the beauty of nature and the peaceful environment,” said East Hampton Town Supervisor Larry Cantwell. “Noise imposed from helicopters is a potential threat to that quality of life.”

Mr. Cantwell, Ms. Mittendorf and hundreds of others packed a room last week at LTV Studios, the public-access television station for East Hampton. Also on hand were officials from next-door Southampton who voiced fears East Hampton’s restrictions would push the flights to their town’s landing spots: Gabreski Airport in Westhampton Beach and the heliport in Southampton Village.

In the short term, that is probably what would happen, said Oyvind Vataker, chief pilot for Helicopter Flight Services, a charter company out of New York City.

Under rules first recommended in 2008, helicopters flying near the populous suburbs on Suffolk County’s northern coast are required to operate at 2,500 feet and a mile offshore. But as those flights eventually track south toward the Hamptons, the traffic sparks complaints from people who live below.

For this year, one options suggested by the consultant would impose a year-round curfew on landings and departures from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. The idea has received support from some helicopter operators.

A second option would ban aircraft deemed noisy by the town—primarily helicopters—from 8 p.m. to 9 a.m.



The third option would ban helicopter traffic on weekends and holidays during the summer season.

A fourth would limit individual aircraft to a single landing and departure each week.

Some small-business owners dependent on seasonal income said the proposals would be crippling. “We have

12 weeks to do 52 weeks of business,” said Cindy Tuma, co-owner of Sound Aircraft, which provides fueling and maintenance services at the airport. “Banning and restricting travel to this airport in the summer season, yes, it’s going to destroy the airport.”

Doug Cunningham, who runs a car detailing business, said helicopter restrictions would hit landscapers, pool cleaners and contractors who service the influx of seasonal residents.

“I can sympathize with the people,” Mr. Cunningham said. “I’m not against controls or some curfews, but I think the way they’re doing it is just too aggressive.”

Mitchell Moss, professor of urban policy and planning at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University, said he estimated in a 2014 study that airport users contributed about \$48 million in direct spending to the East Hampton economy annually. The study was commissioned by the Eastern Region Helicopter Council, a trade group.

“If you’re going to ascribe that kind of benefit to something like the airport, it’s only the additional trips—trips that wouldn’t happen but for the helicopters—that matter,” said David Gruber, a vocal opponent of airport traffic. “I find it difficult to believe that’s any significant number.”

Kurt Carlson, chief executive of HeliFlite, another charter company, said his firm had offered several proposals late last year. Those included the legalization of private helipads, which he said would ease the concentration of traffic at the airport.

Mr. Carlson said the town’s proposals were “draconian” and “guaranteed” to end up in court.

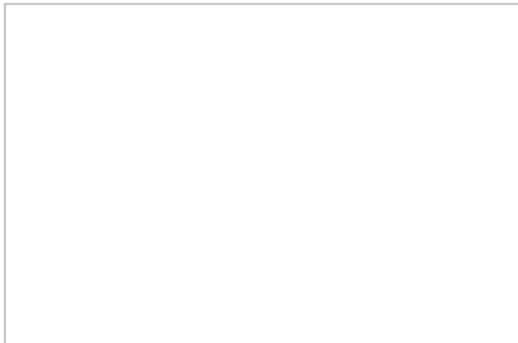
Residents are wary. Pilots had once agreed to voluntary altitude restrictions that offered residents relief, but the arrangement didn’t hold, said Southampton Town Supervisor Anna Throne-Holst.

“At the time, they clearly had no incentive to do it, and perhaps now they understand how severely impacted their industry could be,” she said. “Maybe that will bring them back to the table and be a little more cooperative.”

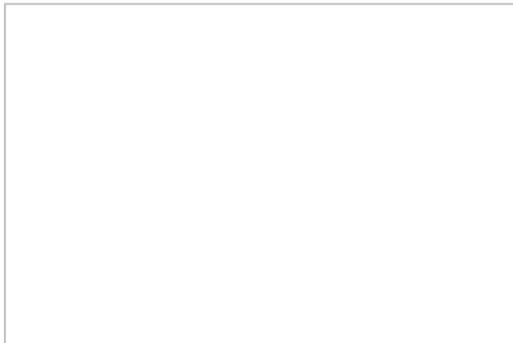
Corrections & Amplifications

Mitchell Moss is professor of urban policy and planning at the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management at New York University. An earlier version of this article incorrectly referred to him as an economist.

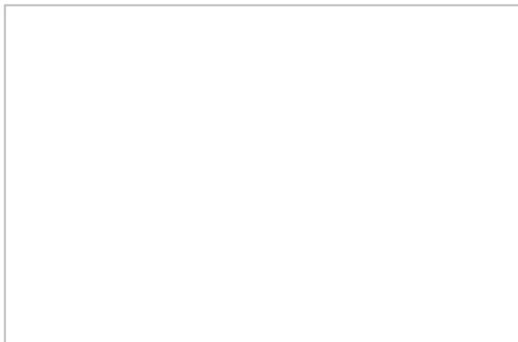
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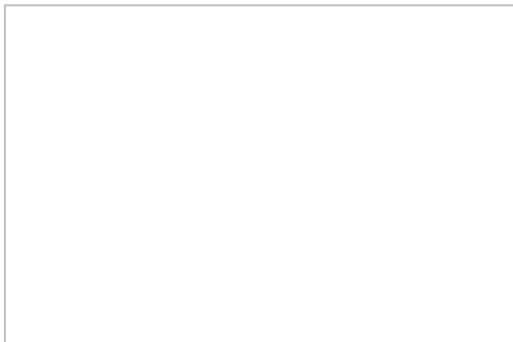
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