

Montgomery County

→ Quiet Skies Coalition

“BLINDSIDED BY THE FAA”

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Montgomery County Quiet Skies Coalition

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Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) representatives blindsided members of the [Reagan National Airport \(DCA\) Community Noise Working Group \(CWG\)](#) when the agency informed them late last week of plans to fast-track changes to flight paths to and from Reagan National Airport — without seeking input or comment from any affected community members.

The upshot of this covert move promises to be an intensification of already-severe levels of jet aircraft noise that plague thousands of residents in Montgomery County and elsewhere in metropolitan Washington, D.C.

“This unilateral decision is as shocking as it is deplorable,” said Gretchen Gaston, a leader of the Montgomery County Quiet Skies Coalition, Ltd. “Once again, the FAA has demonstrated it is incapable of acting in good faith when the interests of DC area residents are concerned.”

The Federal Aviation Administration said altering the flight paths was necessary to prevent occasional instances of commercial aircraft veering into protected airspace over the capital.

The Noise Working Group, which includes representatives from Maryland, Virginia, and the District of Columbia, was told at its meeting May 23 that the U.S. Secret Service had asked the FAA to address the inadvertent airspace incursions, of which there may be four or five a month. Most of these episodes take place when aircraft are departing Reagan National.

Anne Hollander, another leader of the Montgomery County Quiet Skies Coalition, Ltd., noted that the FAA could have used the Secret Service request to confront two problems at once. The agency could have addressed the severe aircraft-noise problems that are central to the Working Group’s mandate while responding at the same time to make sure protected airspace is secure. Instead, the agency decided to press ahead, in

expedited fashion, with a controversial GPS-based plan for routing aircraft traffic to Reagan National which is expected to worsen the noise problem.

This procedure will further concentrate and intensify aircraft noise over homes, neighborhoods and schools that are miles from the airport but nonetheless have been devastated by unwanted jet engine noise since the FAA began initiating a multibillion dollar airspace-modernization program known as NextGen.

The new GPS-based procedure will be a precise overlay of the approach flight path that is the subject of a pending lawsuit brought by the state of Maryland against the FAA. FAA representatives at last week's Working Group meeting described the new procedure as merely an "overlay of an existing procedure." But the flight path being overlaid has never been evaluated for environmental impacts, which is a principal reason Maryland initiated legal action against the FAA in 2018. Final briefs in that case are due to the DC Circuit Court on May 30. Oral arguments are not yet scheduled.

Meanwhile, the FAA representatives said the new approach procedure will take effect as soon as August 15.

"Not only is the FAA fast-tracking a very problematic approach procedure," Hollander said, "it also has failed to make a case that this procedure is essential to resolving the incursions problem. The agency did not explain why it is necessary to further concentrate approaching flights in areas of Maryland that are 5 to 15 miles north of protected airspace, while the incursions take place much closer to the runway."

The FAA consulted neither the affected communities nor the Working Group members before announcing the new procedure. But the FAA *did* consult extensively with representatives of commercial airlines. Not coincidentally, the new procedure will hand commercial airlines a flight procedure they have been seeking for years, one that will allow pilots arriving at DCA to use onboard navigational equipment to achieve greater "operational efficiency" (which means more airplanes into the airport = more money for the airlines).

Given the absence of community consultation and the hasty implementation schedule, the new GPS approach procedure appears to be an end-run around Maryland's legal challenge. It is yet another appalling example of the FAA bowing to the aviation industry while it ignores the legitimate interests and concerns of residents and their neighborhoods.

The Montgomery County Quiet Skies Coalition Ltd., is a local, not-for-profit organization whose members have been severely affected by flight paths and procedures into and out of Reagan National Airport that the FAA instituted starting in 2015.