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FAA COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT – OR COMMUNITY DIS-ENGAGEMENT?

[Following are excerpts from a paper outlining problems with FAA's Community Engagement process submitted to ANR by the founding members of the Aviation-Impacted Communities Alliance: Cindy L. Christiansen, Anne Hollander, and Darlene Yaplee. AICA is a national group of community advocates who create position papers and briefings on legislative issues and industry practices with the goal of legislative change to protect aviation-impacted communities. Their full paper, with biographical information, was sent as an attachment to today's emailed issue of ANR.]

The FAA reviewed its "steady progress" on community engagement at the NextGen Advisory Committee (NAC) meeting on March 18, 2021. Subsequently NAC member Brad Pierce, also President of N.O.I.S.E (National Organization to Insure a Sound-Controlled Environment) suggested at the June 21, 2021, NAC meeting that two or three meetings be held with aviation industry stakeholders between now and the next NAC meeting in October to better understand community engagement on aviation noise, discuss what has worked at specific airports regarding community engagement, overarching policies on the issue, and how stakeholders can partner on solutions to aircraft noise impacts.

The FAA's efforts for community engagement continue to fail at addressing the goals of communities who are currently or potentially harmed by aviation operations, i.e., to mitigate existing impacts and to avoid future harm. Community engagement must be timely, provide full disclosure, and allow meaningful input and consideration before FAA decisions are made. Communities impacted by noise and other pollutants from aviation must be sufficiently included as legitimate stakeholders versus the current non-representation or underrepresentation.

In the spirit of community engagement and to encourage a "meaningful dialogue" and outcomes, we urge Mr. Pierce and the NAC to include in their meetings

an adequate number of representatives who are residents and/or elected officials from communities that are directly impacted by aviation operations across the country, including but not limited to Metroplexes and single sites.

During the meetings, the following fundamental issues in the FAA's community engagement process to date need to be addressed:

1. The term "Community" is ambiguous and must be defined to avoid misunderstandings. We propose that the term "Community(ies)" be used exclusively to refer to residents who are directly impacted by noise and other pollutants due to aviation, and/or their duly elected or appointed representatives. Under our definition, e.g., an Airport operator would no longer be considered a Community representative by the FAA.
2. Information shared by the FAA on aviation impacts frequently omits, obscures, and otherwise fails to disclose the true aviation impacts to people on the ground.
3. Too little, too late – aviation impacted communities are involved too late in the design process for their concerns and unique knowledge of the affected areas to be taken into account; instead the communities are only allowed to "participate in participation" as explained in the metaphorical "Ladder of Citizen Participation," one of the most widely referenced and influential models in the field of democratic public participation.
4. In the few cases where the FAA has considered community proposals, it has often not acted in good faith. Specifically, the FAA has often failed to disclose the ground rules, refused to share critical information, made unilateral decisions such as implementing something different and/or counter to what was recommended, and/or has been inconsistent in its positions and community engagement process.
5. Community engagement should not have the goal of "... achieving community understanding and acceptance..." [as stated in the PBN Blueprint Community Outreach Task Group Report, June 2016] and superfluous activities that do not foster meaningful dialog to address community concerns. Rather it should have the goal of obtaining and then acting on meaningful input from impacted communities for designing procedures and determining operations that minimize harm to people under the flight paths.

6. Affected communities are either excluded from participation or granted an insufficient degree of influence in the process. Community representation in procedure and operation discussions and input on policy decisions is "...largely or entirely tokenistic [sic]: citizens are merely involved only to demonstrate that they were involved" or vastly under-represented so they have no voice, according to the Ladder of Citizen Participation model, Organizing Engagement.

7. FAA's community engagement structure and strategy actually foster community disengagement and suppress input from one of the most important stakeholder groups, specifically the communities impacted by noise and other pollutants from aviation.

[The following excerpts document instances where the authors assert that FAA has not acted in good faith in community engagement to address aircraft noise impact.]

- On September 27, 2016, the FAA entered into a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the Massachusetts Port Authority to "[seek] reductions to overflight noise impacts of aircraft operations at Boston Logan International Airport (BOS) that result from the FAA's implementation of NexGen precision-based navigation (PBN) procedures including RNAV." This was a twelve- to eighteen-month study to help communities around Logan airport but also communities nationwide who are harshly impacted by PBN procedures. Communities were told that the study would consider "flight track dispersion" along with other "potential uses of PBN for reducing noise" such as "noise preferred arrival and departure routes," e.g., over the water or highways. Five years later, on June 24, 2021, communities learned that PBN will not be used for dispersing planes at Logan. The only procedures that will be considered for FAA approval are ones that simply move waypoints and ones that fly over water that could be used during low volume periods, but none that disperse planes.
- The FAA refuses to share information with communities in a timely fashion even though the FAA participates in Roundtable meetings. The FAA has actively blocked community communication; for example, the FAA Western Regional Administrator prohibited the SFO Airport proprietor (designated by the FAA as the community representative) from sharing information on the Big Sur Overlay procedure after the June 4-5, 2019, Full Working Group meeting, which discussed the details of the new procedure. As a result, the community had to submit FOIA requests, which were completed but heavily redacted. This lack of transparency and refusal to disclose important information is a common complaint of

communities around the country.

- At times, the FAA implements an airspace procedure change that runs counter to the intent of the community input and/or its original request. There must be an engagement process and/or recourse to address this serious disconnect. For example, for the PIRAT procedure (NorCal Metroplex), the FAA claimed in the CATEX Correspondence: 2020-03-06 Letter from SCSC Roundtable to FAA regarding Follow-up Questions on PIRAT TWO presentation, that the procedure change was a “Community Request,” even though the FAA implemented something notably different than what was requested and without transparency or consultation with either the potentially affected communities or the originally requesting entity. The FAA later admitted that PIRAT was not a community request. However, the FAA did not rescind the new procedure despite the increased noise impacts that the change caused.
- The FAA is inconsistent in getting approvals from communities for changes that have been requested. Sometimes the FAA requires a Roundtable’s approval before implementing the FAA proposed solution; other times it does not. For example, the FAA asked the SFO Roundtable to approve the NIITE HUSSH procedure change proposed by the FAA. On the other hand, the FAA never consulted the community or Roundtable to approve the new PIRAT procedure. It is unclear what approval process the FAA will follow on the upcoming Big Sur Overlay procedure, which was a community request; We hope that the FAA will seek community approval given that FOIA-obtained information shows that the proposed procedure is not what elected officials recommended and asked for.