

# Lake Tahoe Airport noise monitoring to change

By Kathryn Reed

Military helicopters are the No. 1 noise problem at Lake Tahoe Airport and there is nothing city officials can do about it.

With the city having taken millions of dollars in grants from the Federal Aviation Administration, it is obligated to allow military aircraft to access the airport. It is often used as a high elevation training airport for the various branches.

Noise at the airport – specifically how to monitor it – was a topic at a council meeting this month. The five decided to push a decision to later this spring.

Things have been rather lackadaisical since the 20-year 1992 settlement agreement expired. That document was the result of a lawsuit against the city filed by TRPA and the League to Save Lake Tahoe. With commercial airliners no longer coming to Tahoe and jets becoming much quieter, the issue is barely an issue today.

The airport receives on average 12 noise complaints a year. It's the military and planes associated with the celebrity golf tournament that generate the bulk of the calls.



Military aircraft are regularly flying into Lake Tahoe Airport. Photo/LTN

“Lake Tahoe Airport under federal and state regulations is not required to have noise requirements. It is strictly voluntary for our customers,” airport manager Mark Gibbs told the council.

Still, that does not mean monitoring can just go away. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is a huge player. The bi-state regulatory agency reviews its thresholds every four years and would like the city to be in alignment with its schedule.

This spring TRPA hopes to “identify priority threshold standards to work on and update.” The criteria are for them to be SMART – specific, measurable, agreed upon, realistic, time-related.

“The city’s proposed approach to the noise exposure contour mapping and validation will happen every four years, not annually. It’s my understanding the city agreed to recommend to move forward with a four-year mapping/validation cycle to help meet TRPA’s threshold evaluation reporting requirements,” Tom Lotshaw, spokesman for TRPA, told *Lake Tahoe News*. While

that was the recommendation in the original staff report, it could change next go-round.

What the council will have to decide at a future meeting is what if any standards it wants to abide by.

Gibbs told *Lake Tahoe News* one option "is to develop a noise exposure map showing cumulative noise impacts based on the state of California standard for calculating and producing an aviation noise impact metric for public consumption. The TRPA also has a CNEL (community noise equivalent level) cumulative impact standard for the airport impact on residential areas. This standard is 60 CNEL."

CNEL measures decibels at a location over time.

Gibbs said the state and FAA have determined cumulative noise event reporting is "the best means of quantifying and reporting aviation noise to the public."

If the city goes this route, in all likelihood data from single noise events would not be collected.

CNEL doesn't address the problem of a plane flying over a person's house at 85 decibels once a day because once those numbers are averaged in to show the CNEL level that one incident is just a blip.

The TRPA, though, is not completely on board with only having cumulative data.

"In regards to the single-event noise monitoring, we're going to evaluate and determine how best to proceed on that front," Lotshaw said. "In the past, we used noise monitoring equipment at Barton Beach to monitor both shore zone noise events and airport-related noise events in the flight path. So a situation like that might be the best way to monitor for multiple needs with one piece of equipment, given limited funding and resources."

The agreement the city had with BridgeNet International to collect noise information from six monitoring locations and report the findings expired earlier this year. The agreement with Versadial Inc. also expired this year. That firm provided airport aviation radio recording services in regards to aircraft noise.

It is the ending of these contracts that is allowing the city to rethink how it monitors noise. Gibbs is proposing using a computer model developed by the FAA that is used in other resort locations like Aspen, Colo., and Jackson Hole, Wyo.