

Sonoma County residents report ‘deafening’ airplane noise after federal flight path changes

Residents have flooded the county and airport with hundreds of complaints since last January, when federal authorities shifted paths for departing aircraft, which now fly lower over populated areas, affecting especially western Sonoma County.



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An Avelo jet is readied for departure as an American Airlines jet heads for the terminal at the Charles M. Schulz Sonoma County Airport, Monday, Nov. 4, 2024. The departure flight path now takes air traffic over west Sonoma County. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

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For nearly 20 years, Theresa Martinelli’s home in Sebastopol has been her quiet sanctuary, nestled among redwood trees, a creek and orchards.

But last year, the drone of departing airplanes overhead became nearly incessant, forcing her to consider leaving the place she loves.

“The sound is so deafening,” Martinelli said. “I hear them at night and wake up.”

Martinelli isn’t the only person to notice increased air traffic noise from Charles M. Schulz Sonoma County Airport over the past year. Hundreds of other residents complained to the airport and Board of Supervisors about rising plane noise over about 10 months, according to county records.

Monthly noise complaints received by the airport were up by a range of 200% to more than 600% last year over 2023, [county records show](#).

Most of the complaints came from west county — from the communities of Sebastopol, Graton, Occidental and Forestville, home to about 13,000 people.

The increase in noise, airport and county officials say, is due to an increase in traffic over west county that came about when the Federal Aviation Administration changed procedures for departing aircraft last year.

Federal officials say they provided the county notice of the changes as early as January 2024.

The airport’s top administrator and county officials insisted they did not know about the changes until months after they had taken effect — after their offices were flooded with complaints.

The new procedures also were uploaded Jan. 25 to a publicly accessible Federal Aviation Administration website, used largely by pilots.

Jon Stout, the county airport manager, who is a pilot, said he didn’t see that post and does not



Theresa Martinelli and her partner Ron watch the skies from the front porch of their home near Sebastopol, Tuesday, Oct. 29, 2024. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

regularly check that site.

He has said repeatedly since last fall — when the county first explained the pattern change in a pair of packed public meetings — that no advance or timely notice of the FAA changes was received by the county administration team that oversees the airport.

There was no public process invoked by the FAA in this case, and the only real recourse that would offer residents relief could take three to five years.

Supervisor Lynda Hopkins, who received a large share of the noise complaints from her west county constituents, said the Federal Aviation Administration can change procedures with “no warning or notice.”

“The biggest challenge is the disempowerment of local government and local communities,” Hopkins said in an interview.

“This is a federal issue. There needs to be better protocol and requirements for local engagement in these federal processes but that is not something I can control as a county supervisor.”



An American Airlines jet departs from the Charles M. Schulz Sonoma County Airport, Monday, Nov. 4, 2024. The departure flight path now takes air traffic over west county. (Kent Porter / The Press Democrat)

Spike in noise complaints for growing airport

Coming out of the pandemic, the airport that sits between Santa Rosa and Windsor just west of Highway 101 has been adding flights and [setting records for passenger numbers year after year](#).

That increased business did not appear to be the driving force behind the noise complaints, though.

Instead, officials point to a shift in prevailing outbound air traffic patterns over west county prompted by the changes made by federal officials almost exactly one year ago — a link county airport officials would not make for several months.

“This is harming our peace and quiet, quality of life, relaxation and concentration, air quality, health — and property values.”

— Sebastopol resident Patricia Dines

The shift made it such that departing traffic, including commercial and private aircraft, now make their initial turns closer to the airport when they reach 600 feet, making it so they are flying lower over populated areas, Stout said.

Before the change, aircraft turned later and farther from the airport and, therefore, flew at a higher altitude over those populated areas, he said.

The shift was apparent to residents, even if some didn’t know exactly what had changed.

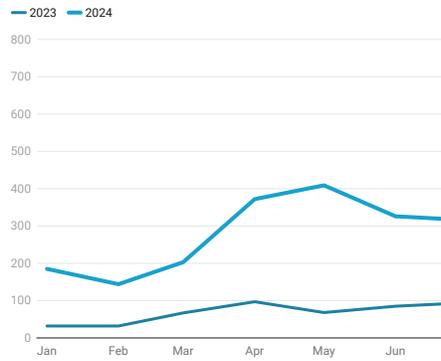
“This new pattern of planes is really causing my neighbors and me a lot of anxiety, and it seems that it is getting worse, not better,” Sara Schomp, 81, who lives just west of Sebastopol, wrote in a Dec. 4 letter addressed to Rep. Jared Huffman, Sen. Alex Padilla, the FAA and Hopkins.

“It is terrifying to awaken to the rumbling of low flying planes late at night,” Schomp wrote.

The pattern change coincided with a sharp spike in noise complaints received by the airport.

Airport Complaints

Number of noise complaints by month for Charles M. Schulz airport



Source: Sonoma County Airport • [Get the data](#) • Created with [Datawrapper](#)

In January 2024, when the new departure procedures were implemented, the airport received 144 complaints, equating to a 478% increase over the same month in 2023, according to the [airport's published noise complaint reports](#).

Complaints spiked again in May, with 409 reported, a more than 500% increase over the same period in 2023. The number of complaints has continued to climb ever since, to 699 in October, the latest period available in the county reports.

It wasn't until then that county officials held a pair of public meetings, seeking to answer some of the questions over air traffic patterns and stem some of the rancor among residents.

The takeaway they offered was unsatisfactory for many of those in attendance.

The county is pursuing federal approval for new flight paths out of the airport, working with a consultant on a wider set of procedure requests geared to inbound and outbound traffic, officials said.

But that local process is expected to take at least two years and possibly longer, Stout told residents, and even then there are no guarantees that federal officials will grant the requests.

Federal change in flight paths

Stout has served as the county's top airport administrator since 2002, a period of remarkable growth that has seen the airport extend its two runways to handle more and larger traffic, modernize its terminal and increase both its routes and its commercial flights, now at 15 a day.

But untangling what was behind the rise in plane noise linked to the airport didn't come immediately last year, he said, in an account shared over four interviews with The Press Democrat after the October meetings.

The change made last January by the Federal Aviation Administration resulted in three new departure paths, or procedures, affecting the larger of the two runways, 14-32, which handles most commercial traffic at the airport.

The shift changed the outbound direction of departing traffic, both northbound and southbound, changed how quickly they can make turns, lowering the height pilots fly over the area after takeoff, Stout said.

Generally, except when necessary for takeoff and landing, aircraft using the Sonoma County airport have a minimum ceiling of 1,000 feet over populated areas.

The new procedures put in place by the FAA indicated a standard minimum altitude after takeoff of 2,300 feet at a turning point in departure pattern.

Officials at the FAA say the new departure procedures were implemented after three others were decommissioned in 2021, leaving only one for pilots to follow.

Growing commercial traffic at Sonoma County's airport

- Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the airport had an average of nine to 10 daily commercial departures.

Stout said the changes were a surprise to him and that he first learned about them in March, as more complaints started flooding in. That's when he initially thought the FAA had implemented them.

"We started getting significant complaints out of Sebastopol, Forestville and west county," he said. "It was an instance where the FAA really didn't communicate, they just made the changes."

- In 2024, it has handled nearly 15 daily commercial departures.
- In 2023, the airport served a total 641,178 passengers.
- Officials indicated in October that the airport was on track to reach 715,000 to 725,000 or more passengers in 2024, another record.
- The airport is served by three carriers — Alaska Airlines, American Airlines and Avelo Airlines — with 15 nonstop destinations.

Stout and other county officials said they were left grasping to explain to residents the limits of what they oversee at the airport and what they do not. Air traffic control, including the patterns that planes and helicopters must follow, is governed by the feds, they said.

"The airport and county can only control aircraft when the wheels are on the ground," Stout said in an interview. "After the wheels leave the pavement, it falls under FAA jurisdiction and pilots follow the FAA's published procedures."

Officials at the FAA said prior to publishing the new procedure, they conducted an analysis that determined "no new areas would be overflowed" and there would be "no significant noise impacts."

Stout, however, said not enough effort went into mitigating the noise impacts for people on the ground.

The airport does not have its own noise metering system to measure, in decibels, airplane noise in the community, Stout said. The FAA can only make estimates by using software that generates estimated noise impacts using the types of aircraft and the number of flights, he added.

Who knew what and when?

In the pair of October meetings and interviews since, Stout has insisted that neither he nor the Board of Supervisors were ever notified by the FAA prior to the procedure changes. And, without prior notification, there was no way for the county to keep its citizens informed.

In response, the FAA said they have "no requirement to notify the public when a Categorical Exclusion is used," which is an action that is determined to not have a significant impact on the environment. The FAA determined they did not need to provide additional community engagement.

However, Samuel Lichtman, a public affairs specialist at the FAA, also said the agency provided an informational handout to the airport on Jan. 9, 2024, about the pending changes.

The handout, which Lichtman said the FAA sent to the airport — Lichtman did not say who it was addressed to or how it was sent — was obtained by The Press Democrat in late November in a public records request. It detailed the three departure procedure changes and mapped out in colored lines the paths pilots would take, including the paths directly over west county.

The Press Democrat shared the document with Stout in early December. He said neither he nor anyone else at the airport to his knowledge had ever received it.

"This would have been a game changer," Stout said at the time. "It has graphics over the ground. The ones I have seen are just lines on white paper, which is very hard to correlate that with what the impact would be."



Airport Manager Jon Stout during Avelo Airlines announcement of four new nonstop routes from Charles M. Schulz–Sonoma County Airport (STS) held at the airport's baggage claim area in Santa Rosa on Wednesday, Feb. 21, 2024. (Erik Castro / For The Press Democrat)

The Press Democrat followed up twice in late 2024 and once in January 2025 with the FAA to request proof of any prior notification to the airport, including the written notice federal officials said they sent to the airport last year.

The FAA did not respond to multiple requests for clarification.

As the agency stonewalled, The Press Democrat accessed the FAA's publicly accessible [Instrument Flight Procedures webpage](#), consulted regularly by pilots to remain up-to-date on current flight procedures and any changes.

The webpage links to the procedure changes for Sonoma County's airport and showed they were published online as early as Jan. 25, 2024 — about two months prior to when Stout said he became aware of them.

"We don't check that on a regular basis," Stout said of the FAA procedures page. "They make routine changes to procedures all the time so seeing the difference is not always intuitive."

"If you are a pilot, you are flying under instrument rules on a regular basis, and you need to keep track of procedural changes because you need to update your records for the aircraft," he added.

Stout again said it was complaints from residents that sounded the alarm that anything had changed.

'Harming our peace and quiet'

In the two October meetings, Stout, Hopkins, Supervisor James Gore and others addressed audiences with more than 150 concerned community members.

A court reporter was on hand to record their comments, and complaints about airport noise dominated both sessions.

Sebastopol resident Patricia Dines attended the Oct. 2 meeting and connected with other residents outside the auditorium afterward, who shared similar concerns.

Dines even started her own website to encourage other residents to take action and file formal complaints.

"This is harming our peace and quiet, quality of life, relaxation and concentration, air quality, health — and property values," she wrote on her site.

"Residents and others weren't notified in advance of this drastic change to our lives, so we couldn't object then!"

Stout, Hopkins and Gore each participated in the county presentations, but there was no live comment period in front of the county officials.

Instead, Stout said he would read each of the complaints documented by the court reporter.

Long-term solution years away

Stout also shared at the meetings that the airport is contracted with Cignus, a Virginia-based aviation and aerospace consulting firm, to apply for local changes in flight procedures.

Cignus was initially hired in August 2022 to examine and redesign arrival procedures for arriving flights.

After becoming aware of the changes in departure procedures, Stout said, the airport amended the contract to have Cignus also reassess the departure procedures and flight paths and propose changes to the FAA, Stout said at the meeting.

The aim is to speed the design work on flight procedures that might otherwise be done by the FAA and take much longer, Stout said.

If the airport were to request that the FAA design new procedures themselves, it could take between five to eight years, Stout said, as opposed to the three to five its projected to take the airport and Cignus.

To date, the contract with Cignus is valued at \$278,500, Stout said in a December email. The Board of Supervisors authorizes each stage of the contract before the airport and Cignus can move onto the next step.

More money will be allocated to the contract depending on the level of work needed at each stage, Stout said.

Lichtman, the FAA public affairs specialist, explained more than half a dozen steps an airport has to follow before proposed new or amended flight procedures can be put in place.

The steps include the initial procedure design, an environmental review and testing for feasibility, validation and prioritization.

Right now, Cignus and the airport are reviewing more than 300 comments from the October meetings and are in the early stages of the design phase.

Cignus and the team at the airport intend to have all of the feedback reviewed by the end of this month, Stout said.

Still, it's clear the county is only in the beginning stages of what will be a yearslong process, and even then the ultimate power to approve or reject changes rests with the FAA.

That is cold comfort to Martinelli, who texted in December to share that, after a brief lull in November, the noise of airplanes had returned. On Dec. 15, she counted eight commercial carriers flying directly over her house.

Martinelli said she plans to wait it out for the time being.

"I really do not want to move," she said.

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