

Helicopter Noise: The People's Perspective – Long Island and Chicago



By Robert W. Moorman

In this on-going series on helicopter noise, Vertiflite studies the issues in two more US communities.

Noise on East Long Island

The residents in and around East Hampton Airport near the eastern tip of Long Island, New York are unhappy about the increase in aircraft noise, particularly the clamor generated by helicopters carrying commuters and weekenders flying to and from New York City.

To help bolster their claims about excessive aircraft noise, residents point to a recent report by Young Environmental Sciences and Noise Pollution Clearinghouse, a consultancy, that showed a rise in the incidents of helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft exceeding the town's noise limits in 2013.

On one side of the issue are the fed-up residents, who have endured years of aircraft noise with little help, they say, from the aircraft operators and federal authorities. On the other side sits the aviation industry, including the Eastern Region Helicopter Council, which claims the report is incorrect and doesn't show the increased level of compliance by helicopter operators to the town's noise

The Chicago Helicopter Experience has acquired an EC130 for its tour operations. The company is now building a helipad, water taxi dock and observation deck on the Chicago River. (Chicago Helicopter Experience photo)

level limits. Nor does the report take into account noise abatement procedures that were implemented some time ago by operators to reduce noise in and around East Hampton.

Over the last few years, there has been a 40% increase in helicopter traffic at the airport, claim citizen groups. Blade, the helicopter taxi equivalent of Uber, is one of the principal reasons why helicopter noise is on the rise around East Hampton, according to Kathleen Cunningham, who heads the Quiet Skies Coalition, a citizens group. The service is quite popular. Spread the word through the Blade app, get the passengers loaded at the 34th Street Helipad in New York City, and away you go. Passenger loads to the East Hampton Airport have been steady. But so too have been complaints about the increased noise around East Hampton Airport and elsewhere on Long Island.

However well intentioned, noise abatement procedures adopted by the air transportation industry are only successful if pilots follow them. Cunningham said the best way to reduce fixed-wing and rotary aircraft

noise is to limit operations at the East Hampton Airport. At present, the airport is open 24 hours a day, seven-days a week.

The problem for residents: the town does not control East Hampton Airport. Years ago, East Hampton Airport received a grant from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to repair runway and taxiways. In exchange for accepting those funds, the town signed grant assurances/obligations (GAs) to FAA. Four of the GAs limit the town's right to control aircraft access to the airport. But those obligations sunset at the end of 2014. Once that happens, the town will have a legal right to limit daily operations and possibly impose a curfew.

The issue of helicopter noise has for years been a hot-button topic on Long Island, particularly the North Shore, which runs along Long Island's northern coast, bordering Long Island Sound. Noise from aircraft – helicopters mainly – got so bad that residents solicited help from Senator Charles E. Schumer (D-NY). The result was a voluntary plan that moved helicopter routes on the North

Shore over water. The so-called “New York North Shore Helicopter Route” – a collaborative effort between industry, local, state and federal leaders – was published in 2008.

“At the time, we viewed the route as a good thing because it was based on route diversification,” said Robert Grottel, president of PlaneNoise and an advisor to the rotorcraft industry. “A more diversified route structure is much more appropriate and fair way to go.”

Grottel’s company produces Complaint Box, a data-based software system that can help determine if a noise abatement plan is working and being enforced. PlaneNoise provides technology noise solutions for all five airports managed by the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

On August 5, 2012, the FAA issued a Final Rule that made the North Shore Route mandatory, with a two-year sunset provision. The rule mandates that pilots operating in and around the North Shore of Long Island need to follow the North Shore Route, which is defined by a series of GPS waypoints. Minimum altitude is 2,500 ft (760 m) Above Ground Level on the North Shore Route unless there are weather or safety issues. [Note: pilots can go to www.SkyVector.com to see the Long Island helicopter route chart as well as the guidance the FAA provides pilots.]

FAA extended the route in August 2014 for another two years. When the route became mandatory, the helicopter industry had far less flexibility in their flight operations, according to the



In this video grab from Labor Day 2010, an S-92 flies in low above the roof of a homeowner in East Hampton, New York to the estate of nearby billionaire investment banker Ira Rennert. (Image by Frank Dalene, East Hampton Noise Coalition)

industry. “The rule created a lot of media attention for certain elected officials,” said Grottel. “In reality, the rule did not provide [noise] mitigation for those communities who really need it.”

In fact, helicopter noise got worse for the North Fork communities of Mattituck and Southold. On this point, surprisingly, there is agreement between anti-noise groups and the industry. “Moving the route around is moving the problem around,” said Cunningham, who lives on the south side. “The North Shore Rule/Route has done nothing to improve helicopter noise in the east end of Long Island,” said Cunningham, although it has helped lower noise in

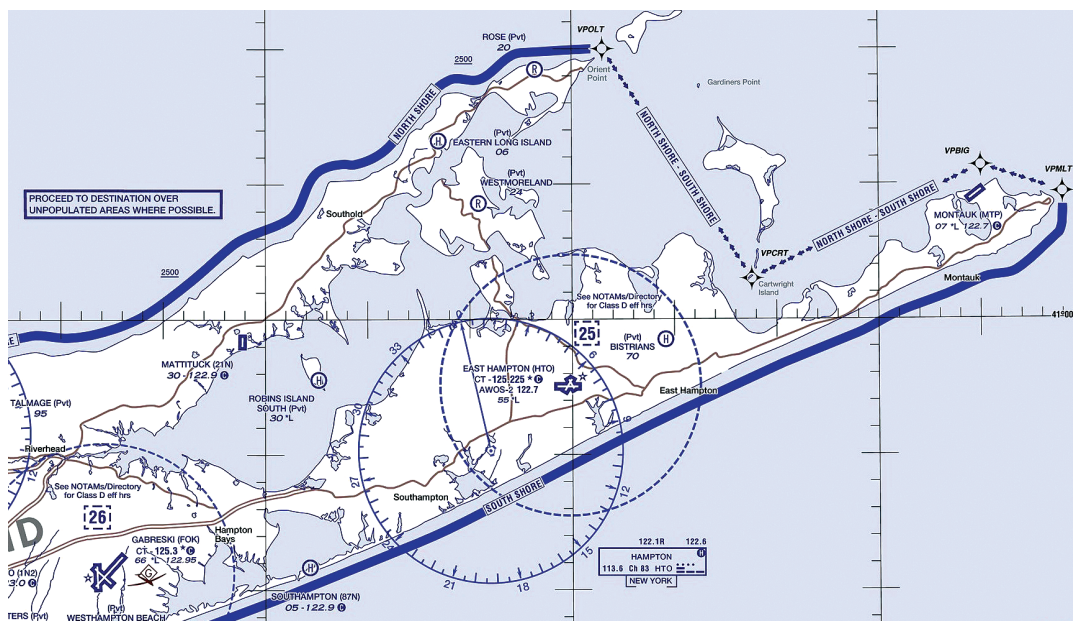
the western region of Suffolk County and Nassau, she added. Asked about dealings with the helicopter industry on reducing noise, Cunningham said: “There have been efforts made [by the industry,] but when you deal with them it is on their terms.”

In addition to setting operational limits at East Hampton Airport, helicopter noise throughout Long Island could be curtailed “if the industry could fly higher,” said Cunningham. It is a suggestion heard a lot from several citizen groups on the East and West Coast, and one endorsed by AHS International and others.

Noise in the Windy City

Helicopter noise is also a growing concern in the city of Chicago, though not yet as much of an issue as in New York City. There, some civic leaders have suggested a ban on tourist helicopter rides over the Hudson River that runs alongside New York City. Jeff Smith, vice president of the Eastern Region Helicopter Council stated that such a ban would devastate the New York City area helicopter tourism, which generates more than \$33 million in the local economy.

“That is always their excuse for noise,” said Ted Rueter, founder of Noise Free America. “They don’t bother



The FAA’s Helicopter Route Chart shows the North Shore and South Shore Routes around eastern Long Island (Skyvector.com)



Blade uses an app that allows users to book a seat or crowdsource a charter on Liberty Helicopters. Regular flights from New York City to the Hamptons are increasing flights and noise complaints at East Hampton Airport. (Blade)

to try and quantify or accept the value of peace and quiet." Earlier this year Rueter helped a citizens group of the Pilsen neighborhood of Chicago's Near South Side to fight plans by Chicago Helicopter Experience to build a \$12.5 million helipad, water taxi dock and observation deck on 4.5 acres (1.8 ha) at the Chicago River. The plan was temporarily halted, but in March 2014, the city's planning commission approved the plan, paving the way for approval in April by the city council.

"We are almost finished with our construction [of Phase I] and plan to open the first private heliport sometime in the near future," said Trevor Heffernan, president and CEO of Chicago Helicopter Experience. He hopes the site will be operational sometime in 2015.

Despite claims to the contrary, Heffernan said he held numerous meetings with the affected communities and local leaders "on the facts of the project," he said. "There was a concerted effort on the other side to create a misleading campaign against the project with a bunch of false information."

Heffernan, a lifetime resident of the Chicago area, promised communities that his helicopters would never fly over any homes. At present, the company's heliport is in Bridgeport, five blocks from where he lives. Heffernan said the company has one designated flight path in and out of the new facility, which is over I-55 out to the lakefront. "Our [new] location is isolated between the railroad tracks, two highways with the river to the north and over 1,200 ft [365 m] from any homes or businesses,"

said Heffernan. "We chose the location purposely to mitigate the impact on the surrounding community."

Helicopter operations in and around Chicago are likely to pick up. Chicago Helicopter Experience isn't the only operator to win approval by the Chicago City Council. A vertiport will soon serve the Illinois Medical District's hospitals. Heffernan said his company listened to the noise concerns of Chicago's Pilsen, Bridgeport and Chinatown communities, making adjustments to the flight path to lower the noise.

Heffernan said the company will primarily operate the Airbus Helicopters EC130, which he notes is one of the quietest helicopters operating today. Chicago Helicopter Experience had previously flown a Robinson R44 and a R66 for flights over the city. Now the company is primarily flying the EC130 and gives tours of the city from out over Lake Michigan to lower the noise impact on residents.

Despite Heffernan's assurances and community outreach, distrust between Chicago area citizen groups and segments

of the helicopter industry remains, which indicates more work needs to be done to bring both sides together. Jerry Mead-Lucero, organizer for the Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization (PERRO) stated in a news release that the heliport will add yet another source of noise and air pollution to the neighborhood.

Noise Free America's Rueter had a final word on the subject: "Even though the Chicago Helicopter [Experience] project was, unfortunately, approved by the Chicago Planning Commission and City Council, I'm certain that people in Chicago will continue to fight for peace and quiet. No one wants their neighborhood constantly assaulted by noise."

True, but efforts in Los Angeles County and on Long Island, NY, to some extent, show that cooperation between anti helicopter noise-groups, local and federal officials and the rotorcraft industry is possible, if occasionally fractious. And that is a good start toward conflict resolution.

About the Author

Robert Moorman is a freelance writer specializing in various facets of the fixed and rotor wing air transportation business. With nearly 30 years of experience, he runs a freelance writing business, RWM Associates. His writing clients include several of the leading aviation magazines targeting the civil and military markets. He can be reached at rwmassoc@verizon.net.



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