

Pilots sue over hospital near airport

BY PAULINE ZENNER
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An organization of local pilots is suing Santa Cruz County and the city of Watsonville to delay rezoning of the proposed new site of the Watsonville Community Hospital, which would be located within the airport's air traffic pattern.

The Coalition for Responsible Airport Management and Policy says neither city nor county has an airport land use plan or a commission to evaluate noise and safety hazards created by locating a hospital so close to the airport.

The suit, filed in Santa Cruz County Superior Court, seeks an injunction to delay rezoning of the Seagate property at Airport Boulevard and Nielson Street from industrial park to public building.

Noise, safety concerns

Locating the hospital near the airport could result in noise complaints and safety concerns, which could lead to a movement to curtail activities at the airport or even close it, said William Dickerson, a board member of the Bay Area group and a pilot from San Martin.

Pilots are worried the hospital will be directly under the course for planes landing in bad weather, which are often maneuvered by instruments only.

"Pilots will be maneuvering very low, and then begin an immediate climbing turn at full power — right over the hospital — under the worst possible weather conditions," said Dickerson.

Impact report found lacking

An environmental impact report doesn't consider that and other safety and noise issues, said Bill Dunn, founder of the group and vice president of the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association in Washington, D.C.

"The airport traffic pattern was changed last year, ostensibly because of noise complaints from homes even farther away from

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— Cory Allen,
Watsonville Community Hospital

the airport than the proposed hospital location," Dunn said.

The group is not seeking the relocation of the hospital, Dickerson said, only that the city and county comply with state law requiring an airport land use plan and a review by experts before rezoning.

"It was brought to the attention of the city and the county two years ago that the state requires an airport land use, commission be in place," Dickerson said.

'Steamroll' process

Group members have written to Mayor Oscar Rios and the county board of supervisors, Dickerson said, "but they continue to steamroll things through without considering all aspects."

Rios and county Supervisor Ray Belgard could not be reached for comment.

City Manager Steve Salomon said Watsonville has abided by the law.

"Legislation did require that there be an airport land use plan and commission at one time, but that law was suspended when it was passed as a state mandate, which requires the state to pay for the plan," Salomon said. "But the state doesn't have the money to pay for it."

Cory Allen, the hospital's public relations director, said project planners have studied and researched the proposed site long and hard.

"We sit in a more tenuous flight pattern currently than we would in this new location," Allen said.

A hearing on the request for the injunction will be held Aug. 11 in Superior Court.