

New flight path proposed

Planes would be rerouted over La Selva Beach to clear way for new Watsonville high school



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A plane lands Monday at Watsonville Airport, where take-offs and landings may be rerouted to accommodate a proposed high school.

Airports

7.25.00

Watsonville City Council to take up airport issue at meeting tonight

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WATSONVILLE — In a move that could smooth the way for state approval of a new high school, Watsonville officials are considering re-routing flight patterns at the Watsonville Airport.

Planes taking off from the airport's main runway would cross Highway 1 and then bank right toward La Selva Beach instead of left as they do now. Landing planes would approach the airport from the north instead of the south.

Now, planes taking off pass over the Pajaro Valley Unified School District's planned high school site west of Highway 1. While they still would be heard from the school, they would not fly over the campus, eliminating some safety concerns. Without planes flying overhead, the school district may be able to develop more of the 70-acre

school site.

The Watsonville City Council is scheduled tonight to discuss seeking Federal Aviation Administration approval to make the changes. But Airport Director Don French stressed Monday that the city is only "exploring its options" and the recommendation doesn't mean the city-run airport will change flight patterns. He said the city is making the request in anticipation of being asked to do so.

That request could come from Caltrans Division of Aeronautics. Caltrans is evaluating the safety of the Harkins Slough Road school site in relation to the airport.

A new aeronautical evaluation was one of the conditions the state Coastal Commission placed on the school district when it approved the site in March.

In its request for a re-evaluation, school officials said they need to know if the cur-

rent approval for a 70-acre site still stands, what additional area outside the site is approvable and what changes can be made at the airport to maximize development of the school site.

The Committee for a Safe High School Site, which has strong objections to the school site, suggests the district or the city may have gotten wind that an unfavorable Caltrans evaluation was pending.

"Could it be that the Department of Transportation has let it be known before they complete their aeronautics evaluation ... that the site is not suitable for a school," committee member Sandra Nichols said in a news release Monday. "Why else would the Watsonville City Council place an item on their agenda at the last minute to ask the FAA for permission to 'flip' the airport, changing the current left-hand traffic pat-

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tern to a right-hand traffic pattern?"

French and Terry McHenry, the school district's assistant superintendent, said they had received no word yet from Caltrans about the re-evaluation.

While she said routing air traffic to the right means planes would not cross the site, committee member Sylvia Previtali said it raises noise and safety issues for La Selva Beach and other communities and further demonstrates the school site is a poor one.

"All these people are being asked to make changes for a school site that shouldn't have been there in there first place," she said. Committee members argue that the site is too close to sensitive wetlands, too far from the city and has other flaws.

Pilots had mixed views Monday on the possibility of re-routing planes.

Louise Minnietar, treasurer of the Watsonville Pilot's Association and member of the Monterey Bay Ninety Nines women's flying club, said she opposed the idea because it could confuse pilots.

"Everyone coming into an uncontrolled airport expects a left-side takeoff," she said.

An uncontrolled airport, such as Watsonville's, has no control tower.

"I'd rather see it left the way it is," she said, adding that she thinks the high school site is "illogical" given its remote location.

But a survey of California airports without control towers showed that right-hand takeoffs are common, French said. Of the 166 airports without towers, 112 have right-hand traffic on one or more runways, he said.

The Watsonville Airport Advisory Committee sent a letter to City Manager Carlos Palacios raising safety concerns about a left-to-right change.

Dan Chauvet, advisory committee chairman, said unless all pilots fly the same pattern, landing planes traveling in opposite directions are at risk of a head-on collision. Prevailing winds could also complicate right-turn pattern landings, he said.

Dennis Smith, chief pilot of Granite Construction Co.'s Watsonville-based corporate jet, had not heard of the potential changes.

"It sounds like politics to me," he said.

He said the pattern itself made little difference to pilots but could "open a Pandora's box" as area residents find themselves under the flight path and subject to more noise.

He said he hoped the airport would not get drawn into a battle over the construction of the high school.

The City Council will also consider plans today to begin a runway-extension project. Extending the runway, which airport officials say will make landing safer and allow for heavier planes to take off, could also benefit the high school. Planes taking off from a longer runway would turn left well beyond the high school.