

PDK Airport Environmental Assessment on Jet Departure Paths --

Open Records Lawsuit Win Gives Community Critically Important Evidence

Question #1: What is an Environmental Assessment and why is it important?

ANSWER: An Airport Environmental Assessment (EA) is a tool established by the National Environmental Policy Act to assist federal agencies such as the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), in meeting their obligation to determine whether a proposed federal action might have a significant impact on the “human environment.” The “human environment” includes such things as air quality, noise levels, and water quality.

An Environmental Assessment is a limited, general review of environmental impacts of the specific, proposed federal action, not a detailed, comprehensive study. Consultants for PDK have conducted an EA, submitted to the FAA in December 2005, in order to obtain FAA approval to change the paths that jets take when they depart from PDK Airport to the South. That EA concluded that the change in departure paths would have no significant impact on the human environment.

If the FAA agrees with that conclusion, it will render a “Finding of No Significant Impact,” approve the proposed changes, and reimburse the County for the funds paid to the County’s consultant to conduct the EA.

Alternatively, if the FAA determines that the proposed changes are likely to have a significant impact on the human environment, it must require the County to conduct a much more rigorous and expensive Environmental Impact Study (EIS). That more comprehensive EIS might identify additional problems that would have to be addressed before the proposed changes could be made or prohibit the changes entirely due to environmental concerns.

In 2003, DeKalb County hired consultants to conduct the EA on the proposed new departure paths. The EA concluded that the proposed changes would not impact the human environment. To conduct the EA, the County’s consultants, the LPA Group, headed by a former PDK noise abatement officer, were required to develop what is known as a “fleet mix” for PDK Airport, representing the numbers and types of aircraft that use PDK.

The EA said the fleet mix was developed from three sources of information gathered over a thirty-day period in the spring of 2004: (1) aircraft operations data from the FAA; (2) visual observations of traffic in and out of PDK conducted by citizen volunteers; and (3) samples of data from the Noise and Operations Monitoring System at PDK. These data were purportedly then used to create a picture of operations for the entire sample year, 2004.

In December 2005, PDK Airport submitted the EA to the FAA. But since the fleet mix for the EA had been developed, the County had lost the Open Records Lawsuit (in August 2005) and had been forced to produce computerized data about aircraft using PDK to the successful plaintiff and his legal team.

Community volunteers deeply involved in the Lawsuit used that aircraft data to scrutinize the EA and the fleet mix upon which it was based during the mandatory public comment period on the EA last fall. Using the hard-won data, the volunteers raised and submitted to the County and the FAA very serious questions about the reliability and veracity of the fleet mix. The County and its consultants paid little attention to the questions raised, but the FAA is now looking for answers to those serious questions.

Question #2: Why is the EA and the fleet mix used in it of critical importance well beyond a change in jet departure paths?

ANSWER: DeKalb County has begun to conduct a major FAA-mandated "Master Plan" for PDK Airport. This document will govern the way PDK Airport is developed for the next 20 years. As the basis for developing the much more comprehensive and far-reaching Master Plan for PDK, the County has recently contracted to use the now seriously questionable fleet mix used in the EA on departure paths.

We will notify the community when the FAA has publicly responded to the EA and to the fundamental questions about the reliability of the fleet mix used for the EA AND to be used as the basis for the more comprehensive 20 year Master Plan for PDK Airport.

Stay tuned. Our on-going struggle to protect our lives, property values, quality of life, and open government throughout DeKalb County continues! Thank you for your continuing interest and support.