

April 29, 2009

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENT

Watchdog Group Wants Attention To Pending MSP Runway Closure

Minneapolis was the city most impacted when the south parallel runway (R12L-30R) at MSP was closed for several weeks for major repairs in 2007. The Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC) said for years that the "new" runway would not be used over Minneapolis. But two years ago, the new Runway (17-35) was used for about 300 flights per day over Minneapolis. There was little or no advance coordination with local governments or the public. The schedule was chosen for the convenience of the airlines. The City of Minneapolis was unable to limit additional flights over the City, or chose not to because of economic considerations.

The South Metro Airport Action Council (SMAAC) spoke out strongly that closing a major runway at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport should not result in descents over downtown Minneapolis (homeland security), more frequent use of the "cross-wind" Runway 4-22 (safety), or take-offs over un-insulated neighborhood schools during classes (violates noise compatibility agreements). Now, after a year's delay for the Republican National Convention, airport plans are to close the north parallel runway for repairs for several weeks starting in mid-August.

It is expected that the new runway will be used frequently over Minneapolis and that many more flights, at lower altitudes, will be directed over southwest Minneapolis and Richfield. Also, more use will be made of the cross-wind runway (R4-22) in spite of safety concerns: this runway crosses the other runways and associated taxiways at MSP *on the ground*. The changes will be handled under *temporary air traffic control procedures and by re-routing most flights*.

The MAC did not discuss closing the cross-wind runway because of its proximity, at the runways' intersection, to the construction projects. They did say that FAA rules do not *require* closing this runway unless work is within 60 feet of the runway edge. So the immediately adjacent part of the north parallel runway will be completed during early morning hours, at extra cost. SMAAC noted that FAA rules do not prohibit closing the cross-wind runway either, and this runway contributes little to safe capacity. Our concern is that using this small gain in capacity *safely* introduces substantial complications to air and ground traffic management, particularly during periods of high demand or in case of an emergency. Airline pressure to maintain schedules leads to increased control problems on the ground, SMAAC notes, leading to delays or worse.

"The repair of the main parallel runways at MSP is obviously beneficial to Northwest/Delta, because they, and the other airlines, need a smooth and clean runway." according to Jim Spensley, SMAAC President. "These repairs were postponed for years to keep MSP suited for hub operations until the new runway came online. Frequent cleaning and minor repairs for safety were done over those years as an airport expense, and again Northwest/Delta again benefitted. Once the new runway was available, costly maintenance of the main parallel runways was continued for even higher rates. Something is surely wrong if rates cannot be reduced temporarily during safety-essential and airline-beneficial runway re-construction."

SMAAC objected to changed flight routes instead of reduced rates in 2007, noting that noise mitigation, emergency response, zoning (hazards to flights and height restrictions) were all planned for the usual flight paths. SMAAC again complained that temporary routes, rates, and ground and air traffic control issues were not openly discussed by the MAC for the 2009 project. It would be better if schedules were adjusted away from the busiest hours so that better, safer plans could be made by FAA and MAC.

Instead, the MAC referred the temporary operations plans to its Noise Oversight Committee (NOC). Unfortunately, there is nothing much for NOC to review: details of the *temporary runway use and airspace design changes* have not been released by FAA, and may never be released in detail. Using NOC staff assumptions and how the 2007 closure was handled, NOC is planning a series of announcements and presentations to alert the public to flight routes during the north parallel runway project.

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[NOC's purpose is to bring airport users and city representatives together to discuss airport noise and submit reports to the MAC. NOC is co-chaired alternately by an airline and a citizen representative; it is staffed by the MSP noise manager. Are the cities allowing important concerns -- community coordination, safety, security, and air pollution -- to be decided by NOC?]

MAC staff has run simulations that suggest peaks would be somewhat reduced compared with 2007 *if Northwest/ Delta daily schedules are reduced in August as planned*. Delays will be significant for local travelers anyway, and more so if runway-use changes are made daily due to variable winds and weather conditions. The south parallel runway is longer than the north parallel runway, so -- according to MAC -- more aircraft might use it without crossing another runway, giving MSP a small rate boost compared to the 2007 project. Requests to depart on the south parallel runway starting beyond the intersection with the cross-wind runway is a complicated traffic issue, because a safe runway length depends on aircraft gross weight and wind velocity, aircraft type, and other variables.

How will cities deal with the thorny issues raised in 2007 and as yet unaddressed for the 2009 project? Minneapolis' NOC member, Council Member Elizabeth Glidden, has asked the City Transportation and Public Works Committee to invite MAC for clarifications of operations during the project. The Committee's July meeting would allow little time for changes, if any, or for the city to consider complementary changes such as traffic or emergency response.

SMAAC suggested that the Committee should also hear from independent safety and noise experts. However, if 2007 is repeated, the temporary, complicated operational plan will be sprung on the public just before the project begins, and daily attempts will be made to maintain rates in spite of reduced safe capacity.