

# AN ASSESSMENT OF AIRPORT COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT EFFORTS

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## Abstract

Most airports across the country at best have strained relationships with their adjacent communities, and in many instances they are in open conflict with at least one segment of the community. Reasons for the tension include adverse impacts due to noise and other effects of airport operations, lack of understanding each side's concerns and interests, and insufficient public participation in airport decision-making. Public outreach efforts are largely ineffective and tend to follow similar patterns regardless of the specifics of a given situation. Key factors in the failure of community involvement include (1) the lack of normative consensus on acceptable outcomes, (2) existing polarization that makes empathy and shared decision-making more difficult, and (3) structural problems arising from the limits to airport control over operations and the failure to bring all stakeholders to the bargaining table. Results from a recent data collection effort confirm the first two key factors and the author's observations as an airport consultant inform the assessment of the third. This paper examines these factors, making use of social survey data regarding airport community involvement programs to arrive at recommendations for improved outreach efforts.

## An Assessment of Airport Community Involvement Efforts

One resident near a small airport recently complained, “I have lived near other airports and have never seen an airport operated with such open disregard for the neighboring residents.” A fairly typical airport response is ‘you should have known about us when you moved in’ rather than rolling up shirt sleeves and determining if there are workable alternatives to provide abatement or mitigation. The speaker expresses the frustration and sense of polarization experienced by those living close to airports all across the country. The author, an engineering consultant working on airport noise projects, has heard hundreds of similar laments. And for every citizen complaint, there is an airport operator trying to respond to an angry public while balancing demands for safety, access to air travel, and other pressures.

Many airports across the country have strained or even openly conflictual relationships with their adjacent communities. Adverse impacts due to noise and other effects of airport activity, poor public awareness of how airports operate, and lack of public participation in airport decision-making are frequently cited reasons for negative community attitudes. Most public outreach efforts have not been very effective and tend to follow similar patterns regardless of the specifics of a given situation. Key factors in the failure of community involvement include (1) the lack of normative consensus on acceptable outcomes, (2) existing polarization that makes dialogue and shared decision-making more difficult, and (3) structural problems arising from the limits to airport control over operations and the failure to bring all stakeholders to the bargaining table. Results from a recent social survey confirm the first two key factors and the

author’s observations as an airport consultant inform the assessment of the third. This paper examines these factors, making use of social survey data regarding airport community involvement programs to arrive at recommendations for improved outreach efforts.

## Airports Prioritize Meeting Demand Far Above Community Outreach

The Bureau of Transportation Statistics estimates that 660 million passengers travel each year on 9 million flights to and from 3300 airports in the US.<sup>1</sup> Add to this the hundreds of thousands of military and general aviation flight operations for training and other purposes and the level of aircraft activity is truly impressive. While this provides innumerable benefits to those who fly and the industry that supports air transportation, there are hundreds of thousands of people all across the country who are annoyed by the noise generated as these airplanes take off and land. While the people exposed to overflights know that airplanes are noisy and to varying degrees disturb daily activities and sleep, the controversy receives little attention by the majority of the public, who are not directly affected.

When people complain to their local airport, whether it is a small general aviation facility with propeller aircraft, a large commercial airport or a military airbase, their complaints becomes one of many things demanding the attention of the Airport operator. Airports are like utilities, highly regulated and largely reactionary rather than proactive. Because they receive public funds, Congress through the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) requires that they provide service to anyone who wants to use the facility, as long as that pilot and aircraft meet FAA safety and other standards, including some noise limits. There

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<sup>1</sup> www.bts.gov

are regulations governing how aircraft move around on the airfield, how controllers direct them to take-off and land, and how airplanes are kept a safe distance from one another in the sky. Working within the matrix of regulations, virtually every airport wants to improve the level of air service it provides. Most want to increase traffic so that revenues increase, bringing expanded staff levels, greater access to federal grants for infrastructure improvements, and a higher status within their particular city, state or regional bureaucracy. It isn't that they are callous about making noise; it is more that they see it as a necessary, though regrettable, part of doing business.

Consider the following hypothetical, though representative, scenario. Mrs. Smith lives near an airport. When she calls to say there are airplanes over her house *again* today, they ask her where she lives. If she gives an address a mile off the end of a busy runway, they apologize and tell her there is nothing they can do, airplanes are *supposed* to be over her house. But, Mrs. Smith just bought the house after the realtor had assured her the airport would not be a problem.<sup>2</sup> Soon, Mrs. Smith finds other neighbors who have also bought new homes in the upscale neighborhood; the reasonable prices and the safe streets attracted them. Within months the community members organize themselves and begin a letter-writing campaign to the airport, with copies to the mayor and state senators. Unfortunately, the community members and airport officials are headed toward what is likely to become a seemingly intractable conflict, pitting citizen quality of life against the need for efficient air transportation.

The typical airport-community conversation is weak (if it exists at all) and fraught with misunderstanding and antagonism. Airports

tend to conduct public outreach as though the only purpose were to educate the public about reality from the airport's perspective, in an effort to persuade people to let the airport get on with its business. Because airport staff members are usually busy people with multiple competing demands on their time and attention, public dialogue is rarely a high priority. There is often little attempt to create an ongoing, cooperative relationship that might require the airport to share decision-making with the surrounding citizens. Community members, often poorly informed about how airports operate and what options are available, feel ignored and marginalized to the point that they become extremely frustrated. Many times their expectations for change are unrealistic and, when they press their demands (Mrs. Smith insisting that the airplanes must fly somewhere else), they are easily dismissed by busy airport managers. Such disputes erupt and fester at airports, large and small, all across the country as airport operators, their neighbors, responsible agencies and civic organizations struggle over the need for better public policy regarding air transportation.

The federal agencies that have been engaged in aviation noise issues from the beginning, such as the FAA and Department of Defense (DoD), have made some effort to remedy these chronic problems. In 1990, the FAA released a Community Involvement Manual<sup>3</sup> that lists a wide variety of tools airports can use to improve their relationships with communities. The Manual joins a list of others the agency has provided to assist airports and communities to communicate more effectively. However, the document is not widely read and it does not give sufficient explicit advice on when to use the various tools.

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<sup>2</sup> In one instance in the Midwest, the realtor referred to the airport entrance which was miles away and neglected to mention the runway which was quite close.

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<sup>3</sup> US Department of Transportation, Federal Aviation Administration, Document FAA-EE-90-03

The DoD has also published numerous handbooks on public involvement and has a Technical Assistance for Public Participation<sup>4</sup> program related to environmental restoration projects. However, a recent Inspector General's internal evaluation report on "DoD Environmental Community Involvement Programs at Test and Training Ranges" (Report No. D-2002-122) severely criticized the typical practice of approaching public outreach with the intention to "decide, announce, and defend."

Most of the time, airport efforts at community outreach are sporadic and tied to a specific project such as a federally funded noise study, an airport master plan, or an environmental analysis for a proposed project, all of which require public involvement. The techniques they use are normally determined by what they have done before, or those with which their consultants are most familiar. The most common tools include press releases and websites to disseminate news of study progress, public informational workshops, public hearings, and multi-party advisory committees. Only at a few airports use the dialogue mechanisms, such as advisory committees that include citizen representatives, and rarely continue them beyond the life of the specific study for which they were convened. The general consensus among airports and the FAA is that these outreach programs need to be much more effective. A more analytical approach to airport-community processes and greater flexibility in identifying and implementing outreach tools can help improve the conversation.

This paper is concerned with analyzing airport-community relations and crafting recommendations for improving the dialogue between the airports, which provides real

benefits to the larger community, and the neighbors who are most impacted by the adverse effects of aircraft operations. The discussion here is informed by basic concepts from the field of conflict analysis and resolution. The roots of the conflict must be understood in order to develop an effective strategy for improving the strained relationships between airports and their neighbors. When policy-makers and citizen activists recognize why the tension exists and how it escalates, they are better able to identify the tools needed for defusing existing conflicts and avoiding new ones.

## The Survey

A recent survey of airport operators, consultants, and neighbors provides a picture of what conflicts over airport noise look like. The instrument included a combination of multiple choice questions, statements to which the respondent would indicate agreement or disagreement, and two open-ended questions about what works and doesn't work in public outreach programs. Distributed through Wyle's listserve (an email-based bulletin board) and on the company website, the survey generated 62 responses during the period from February through June 2004. This sample was self-selected from a non-random convenience group to which the author had access through a database of aviation industry email addresses (comprised of airport staff members, consultants, and interested individuals) as well as websites for citizen groups concerned with airport noise and other issues. The intent was to solicit information about an airport, a study process used in a recent or ongoing public outreach program, and the attitudes of airport staff and community members around that program. Respondents were asked to answer the questions while keeping in mind a particular

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<sup>4</sup> DoD's TAPP website:  
<http://www.dtic.mil/envirodod/Policies/PDTAPP.htm>

outreach process rather than reflecting on the overall relationship between the airport and its neighbors.

Airports engage in public involvement for a variety of reasons, but most outreach programs are instituted as part of a clearly defined study or project. In the survey, approximately 40% of the 62 survey respondents reported on community involvement programs undertaken as part of what are called Part 150 Noise and Land Use Compatibility Planning Studies.<sup>5</sup> These studies are specifically intended to engage airports, airport users and communities in a discussion of a recognized noise problem. Twenty-two percent of the processes reported were Environmental Assessment (EA) or Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) studies for changes to an airfield such as a runway extension or new runway. EAs and EISs are governed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations. Fifteen percent of the reports concerned studies examining other anticipated airfield or operations changes such as a new navigational system, a new flight path, or a significant change in activity levels. Seven airports (11%) reported on community involvement for an airport Master Plan. In all these cases, the airport was required by federal regulation to engage in a community outreach effort. The remaining 12% of the cases either did not list a type of study or were clearly elective on the part of the airport.

The survey sample included airport staff members (48%), consultants (6%), community members (27%) and respondents of unknown affiliation (19%). Among the airport cases being described, 24% were for small airports while medium and large airports each represented 37% of the reports (the size was not known for 2%). In terms of the

character of the activity at the airports, 60% of the cases were for airports dominated by commercial flights, 39% were general aviation airports where small private aircraft and business jets dominated, and one case was for a military base.

## Airport Community Involvement Programs

The survey asked about the types of public involvement activities conducted during the study being reported. Two-thirds of programs (66%) included public open house workshops. These are typically conducted in a large room such as a school cafeteria with poster stations set up where residents can speak with study experts and have their questions answered. Citizen comments are normally recorded at a special station set up for this purpose. Comments become part of the permanent record of the study, and may be incorporated in the analysis of the project. Rarely, however, do citizen comments strongly influence the outcome of a study or process. The open house is typical of many airport outreach efforts in that it is designed to disseminate information widely and truthfully, but lacks effective mechanisms for engaging the community in a two-way dialogue. Other examples of this one-way information flow include websites to post study progress reports, newspaper announcements and media broadcasts.

Forty-five percent of the cases reported convening advisory committees or task force meetings that did not include private citizens. These were normally comprised of airport users (airlines, pilot's associations, flight schools, and others), regulatory agencies and local government representatives. Sixty percent convened advisory committees *with* private citizen participation. Some airports

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<sup>5</sup> The Part 150 Study process is defined by Part 150 of Chapter I of Volume 14 of the Code of Federal Regulations, adopted by the FAA.

only convened one of these types of committees, with or without citizen members; other airports convened both types.

Most advisory committees or task forces are just that, “advisory,” without real decision-making power. Conveners often discourage voting on the committees, not because it falls short of a consensus ideal, but because it gives the illusion that the voted decision carries more weight than it really does. While some airports allow the committees a substantial voice in the *process* of a study, many others do not, and rarely do advisory committees determine final results.

Of the various types of studies or processes conducted, citizens were more likely to be given a place on advisory committees in a Part 150 study (73% of Part 150 studies compared to 60% for all study types). This is because the explicit purpose of a Part 150 study is to engage the community in a joint effort to identify solutions to a recognized noise problem. Thirty-one percent of all respondents reported the use of focus groups to assess community attitudes within a Part 150 study, compared to 19% for studies of all types. Thirty-five percent of all studies, including Part 150 studies, employed surveys.

FAA requires formal hearings for Environmental Assessments, EISs, Master Plans, and Part 150 studies. Formal public hearings were held in 50% of all cases reported. Public hearings tend to be counterproductive for airports in that they invite “grand standing” by citizens in front of an audience and, by virtue of their public forum, may discourage flexibility in bargaining following public statements of positions. Most of the time they are held near or at the end of a study, after the draft report is complete and after any genuine opportunity for input has ended. Public comments received at a public hearing must receive a response and both the comment and response become part of the permanent record. As such, they may foreshadow the next round of disputing, but

they rarely affect the outcome of the process within which they occur.

## Unrecognized Factors in the Conflict

The principles of conflict analysis and resolution have penetrated only superficially into the realm of airport-community disputes. Concepts of multi-layer conflict sources, such as Mitchell’s triad of attitudes, behavior, and situation (Mitchell, 1981) and other analytical frameworks are not well known. Of course, it isn’t the lack of familiarity with a systematic model that matters, but the lack of awareness of issues other than data and bargainable interests that weakens community involvement programs. As a result, key factors that characterize airport disputes are often ignored.

One of these key factors is the recognition that airports and communities typically speak past one another about basic values, norms for what is acceptable in the public space, and what role local agencies and communities should have in airport decision-making. Most American communities demand a greater level of participation in public policy development than was common a generation ago, but many airports still make decisions with minimal local input. Airports must respond to other voices such as the FAA, the airlines and the traveling public; they often pay little attention to their immediate neighbors. As a result, they fail to engage their communities in dialogue about airport plans until after the plans have been adopted.

A second key factor is the extent to which communities become polarized over airport noise and the consequences of this polarization. As conflict analysts understand, once conflict patterns such as mistrust, ingroup-outgroup identification, reduced empathy for the interests of the other party, a sense of aggrieved rights, zero-sum thinking, and other effects take hold, continued conflict is practically inevitable. It is extremely difficult



to dismantle these conflict patterns without thoughtful, targeted intervention of some kind. A conflict that manifests these characteristics is likely to continue to escalate, aspirations will become more rigid, and a sense of interdependence and shared interests is diminished, further reducing the likelihood of cooperation, much less creative problem solving. In short, once things have gotten to this point, the airport will have to devote considerable attention to managing the conflict and extraordinary measures may be needed to de-escalate it. It is far better to develop mechanisms for communication and cooperation that will avoid significant polarization of the parties.

Finally, a third key factor is the structure of the overall system within which these parties operate. The aviation system is an institution that has its own practices and norms of which the public is usually unaware. Contrary to community assumptions, many of the most important aspects of airport operations and their impact on the community are outside the control of the local airport operator. The character and tempo of airport operations are driven by traffic demands; the flight patterns are determined by the air traffic control system and the pilots themselves; and the proximity of residential and other noise sensitive land uses near an airport is controlled by local zoning and planning organizations.

This means that the public, which holds the airport operator responsible for the noise impacting their homes, is yelling at a person or organization that has only limited influence on the two factors that matter the most – traffic density and aircraft location. Knowing this, airport operators are reluctant to engage the community, because they don't want to be berated for things outside their control. They accept the norms of the aviation system (to satisfy FAA regulations and respond to traffic demand) and often view airport neighbors either as unfortunates for whom they can provide little relief or as selfish and irrational

NIMBYs (“Not In My Back Yard”-ers) only concerned about their own narrow interests rather than the good of the overall community served by the facility.

Another aspect of the structure that causes problems is the inability to have all the relevant parties at the table. The airport operator is always mindful of something the local public often ignores – the airport provides benefits to a region while adversely impacting only a portion of that overall population. From the conflict resolver's point of view, it is a serious problem that, in a dispute between the airport and local neighbors, the biggest party – those who benefit from the airport – is almost never at the table.

The one aspect of the structure that community members *do* understand and find frustrating is their limited ability to have an impact on airport policy. Without regular input to the decision-making process, airport neighbors find that the only way to have a voice is by escalating the dispute until it rises to the attention of the city, county, state or independent authority that governs the airport, the FAA, or elected representatives in Congress. This aspect of the structure encourages heavier tactics and polarization on the part of the community. Sometimes this works for the good of the community by having an external entity force the airport to change plans or address the noise problem; more often it simply reduces the likelihood of a creative solution and better working relationship.

## What the Conflict Looks Like

The bulk of the survey consisted of a series of 48 statements to which respondents indicated whether they, “strongly disagree,” “disagree somewhat,” felt “neutral,” “agree somewhat,” or “strongly agree.” Some of the statements assessed aspects of the conflict situation, such as, “There was an adversarial relationship between the airport and at least some portion

of the community.” Other statements described attitudes or actions of the airport or the community. For example, one stated, “The airport trusted the community members to be fair and reasonable.” The frequency of response to key statements in these categories is outlined below.

### Assessments

Many of the questions asked the respondent to assess the character of the relationship between the airport and the community, the conduct of the study, or the results of the process. Survey responses show the following:

Prior relationship: Only 26% of the respondents agreed with a statement that the airport had a good relationship with the community prior to the start of the noise study, environmental study or other public process that was the subject of the survey response. Fifty-eight percent disagreed with the statement and 16% gave a neutral answer. In response to a question about whether or not there was an adversarial relationship between the airport and at least some segment of the community, 87% of respondents answered affirmatively. The importance of these results is explored more fully below.

Interestingly, of those 54 respondents who reported that there was an adversarial relationship between the airport and at least some segment of the community, 22% still assessed the airport to have a good relationship with the community overall.

Community satisfaction with the outcome: For all survey cases, only 24% of respondents reported that the community was satisfied with the results of the study or process when it was over. Respondents in 19% of all cases gave a neutral answer and 48% disagreed that the community was satisfied with the outcome. Interestingly, when only the airport staff member and consultant responses are considered, the number reporting community satisfaction with the outcome rose to 35%,

while for community member respondents it dropped to 6%. In some cases, the same airport process was being reported by both sides. Clearly, the community members who participated in the survey were much less satisfied with the study processes than the airport staff members thought. It is possible that the airport staff members gave overly optimistic assessments of community satisfaction; it is also possible that the community members who filled out the survey were less satisfied with their airport experience than the general neighborhood population. It is likely that both factors influenced the data.

Prior relationship and outcome satisfaction: Of those cases that reported a good relationship between the airport and the community prior to starting the study process, 50% indicated that the community was satisfied with the outcome and 25% disagreed that the community was satisfied. This suggests that if the relationship is good when a study/process begins, the chances for success are higher. Looking at cases where there was a prior adversarial relationship between the airport and at least some segment of the community, the percentage of respondents reporting community satisfaction dropped to 22%.

Improved relationship during the process: Twenty-six percent of respondents reported that the airport-community relationship improved during the course of the study, 27% were neutral on improvement, and 44% disagreed that the relationship had improved, and 3% failed to answer the question. Where the prior relationship was reported to be good, 47% of the cases indicated that the relationship improved further. Where the airport had an adversarial relationship with at least some element of the community, 22% reported an improvement, 25% gave a neutral response, and 46% disagreed that the relationship had improved. As might be expected, where relations were initially strained and there was no improvement,



community satisfaction with the resultant outcome dropped to 15%.

**Decision-making:** In 31% of all reports, respondents agreed that the airport had given community members a meaningful role in decision-making. Half the respondents, however, disagreed with this statement. Forty-seven percent of the airport and consultant respondents reported a meaningful role in decision-making while only 6% of the community members reported that they had been given a meaningful role, again pointing to the disparity in perception between the airport staff and consultant respondents compared to the community respondents. One of the most interesting results of the survey was that an increased role in decision-making for the community was *not* correlated with greater community satisfaction with the outcome. Among respondents who indicated a meaningful community role in decision-making, community satisfaction at 21% was actually slightly lower than the satisfaction rate of 24% for all cases.

In other words, the cases where community satisfaction with the outcome was rated as good were actually less likely to report community members having a significant role in decision-making. This runs counter to what most proponents of citizen involvement might expect. The conventional wisdom is that increased access to decision-making results in greater community satisfaction; the results of the survey fail to confirm this.

One possible explanation is that, where airports were very “up front” with the community from the beginning about the lack of citizen influence, expectations were more realistic and the final result was considered acceptable by those without a role in decision-making. Another explanation might be that where the community believed they might play a meaningful role, but the actual role was limited to decisions of little consequence, they would be doubly frustrated with the outcome.

## Attitudes and Actions

Looking at airport and community attitudes and actions revealed the following:

**Differences in values:** Differences in values were indicated by answers to questions about community support for the airport, feelings that rights were being ignored or violated, and perceptions of what the airport’s and community’s priorities were. Only 22% of respondents gave answers that indicated that airport and community values were not in conflict. The vast majority, 60%, indicated significant value conflicts and 17% gave neutral responses. Conflicts over values are known to be particularly difficult. “There is nothing quite as motivating as feeling that one has been deprived relative to a legitimate standard – that one has been treated unfairly or unjustly.” (d’Estree, 2003, quoted in Pruitt & Kim, 2004: 20)

**Normative consensus on what constituted an acceptable outcome:** Most of the respondents (79%) agreed with the statement that, “The airport and community had very different standards for determining what constituted an acceptable outcome.” Using other indicators in addition to this statement, 52% indicated that normative consensus was lacking. (The question was worded so as to avoid asking about preferred outcomes.) The lack of agreement on what might be even acceptable is significant and is predictive of conflict (Pruitt & Kim, 2004).

**Polarization:** The answer to the earlier statement about an adversarial relationship (87% of respondents agreed that there was one) is one indication of polarization. Considering more general indications of polarization, including community members taking sides and some residents thinking the airport made noise over their homes on purpose, 50% of respondents reported polarization. When the broadest indications of polarization were taken into account, all

airport cases reported some degree of polarization, as might be expected in a chronic public policy dispute.

Trust/distrust: Questions were asked to determine to what extent the community trusted the airport and the airport trusted the community. Only 20% said the airport trusted the community and a similar 19% result was given for the community trusting the airport. Overall, 50% reported that the airport distrusted the community and 61% reported that the community distrusted the airport. This response is expected given the degree of polarization noted above.

Ingroup/outgroup identifications:

Respondents reported attitudes and processes that suggested a strengthening of ingroup/outgroup identity during the process in 38% of the cases. This includes those who report adopting an “us/them” mentality, those who observed community members becoming more organized, and reports of coalition formation among airport opponents who had not been allies prior to the process. Where strong ingroup/outgroup identifications separating communities from the airport, much lower rates of satisfaction with process outcomes were reported (16% compared to 24% for all cases). This is to be expected as dialogue between parties would be reduced, empathy reduced, cooperation inhibited, and polarization intensified (Brewer and Brown, Conner, Druckman, Gellner, LeVine and Campbell, Operario and Fiske).

Reduced empathy: When asked whether or not they agreed with the statement, “People should have known better than to move so close to an airport,” 35% of the airport and consultant respondents agreed, 41% were neutral and 18% disagreed. This idea often comes up in conversation with airport staff members, so the high incidence of affirmative or politely neutral responses is not surprising. Among the 17 responses known to have come from community members, one agreed somewhat with the statement, two were

neutral, and 14 (82%) disagreed, most of them strongly. While it is certainly true that people who are sensitive to noise are better off not moving next to an airport, the lack of empathy between airports and neighbors confirms the extent to which attitudes have become polarized. Using several indicators of empathy together, responses showing a lack of empathy represent 34% of the answers, 24% are neutral, and 40% indicate some empathy. This suggests that, even where the parties have become polarized, there may still be openings for improved relations.

Zero-sum thinking: When asked a question to measure the prevalence of zero-sum thinking among respondents, half (50%) indicated that there was no way to satisfy both the airport and community members. Another 13% of responses were neutral and 37% of responses rejected the idea that a mutually acceptable solution was impossible. The lack of hope for a good solution often leads to reduced flexibility and diminished integrative problem solving. Of those who said the airport and the community had a good relationship before the study began, hopefulness increased from 37% to 44%, though this increase came through reducing the number who gave a neutral response (from 13% to 6%); half the respondents still felt there was no way to satisfy both parties.

Inclination to use increasingly aggressive tactics: Questions were asked about aggressive or escalatory (increasingly aggressive) tactics by both the airport and the community. Respondents reported the use of either aggressive tactics or escalation in tactics during the course of 45% of the processes. Of the cases analyzed, 44% reported escalation by the community while 47% reported escalation by the airport. When only airport staff member responses are counted, the community is reported to escalate and use heavy tactics more frequently than the airport; when community respondents are isolated, they report much heavier tactics by the airport than by communities.

## Implications of Survey Results

The survey results reported here confirm the first two key points noted earlier. Airports and communities speak past one another about values, norms and roles. And, once conflict elements such as polarization, mistrust, reduced empathy, zero-sum thinking and escalatory responses are active, opportunities for improving the relationship and reaching a mutually satisfying solution are significantly reduced.

These data, while they may be biased by the self-selection of the respondents, cover a range of situations and give a variety of viewpoints. These diverse responses suggest a generally poor record sprinkled with some encouraging signs. On the negative side, one respondent reported that, “There was very little effort on the part of the airport to really deal with the community issues. The airport’s outreach amounted to providing information that supported the airport’s position that the new runway was absolutely essential and that there were no effective alternative options.” On the other hand, some of the case studies reported satisfactory outcomes, many of the airport staff members tried to engage the community to the best of their ability, marked “us”/“them” thinking was evident in less than 40% of the cases, and even where there was an adversarial relationship between the airport and some portion of the community, 22% of the respondents reported improvement in the relationship during the processes described.

Apart from noise or environmental studies, most airport public relations efforts focus on educating the community about airport operations and providing progress updates that emphasize the great new things that are happening on the airfield and what they mean to the community economically. Very little information flows the other way, from the community to the airport, except via residents’ complaints, which reflect individual concerns rather than collective attitudes.

Individual complainants are much easier to dismiss than mobilized groups of citizens.

Where there is a discussion between the contending parties, the way that each side prepares for the discussion makes a difference. Negotiation research shows that when negotiating teams spend time strategizing how to win, they become less flexible and less successful than if the team spent the time trying to understand the attitudes and positions of the other party (Druckman, 1968). If airport managers and staff members prepare for outreach by planning ways to convince the community or marginalize vocal opponents, the results may be less than satisfactory. The same is true for airport opponents who only plan how to increase their bargaining power with respect to their adversary.

If, on the other hand, airport representatives and opponents spend time trying to analyze the issues from several perspectives and understand the other side’s goals, values, and beliefs, they may be better prepared to respond in a way that leads to creative solutions and a satisfactory outcome.

Because airports lack regular mechanisms for hearing groups of neighbors and concerned citizens, outreach efforts during noise or environmental studies are crucially important avenues for communities to try to influence airport policies. The community must, in effect, put all its eggs in the basket of the current study process. When that process is ineffective, a significant opportunity is lost for both the airport, which needs the goodwill of its neighbors<sup>6</sup>, and the community that has so little voice in between studies. As communities begin to demand a greater role in public policy making in all arenas, including airport practices, the tension during a study outreach effort can only increase. This increase in tension is especially likely given

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<sup>6</sup> There have been cases where the FAA declined to fund an important airport project because of the degree of community resistance to it.

that national air traffic levels are predicted to grow steadily, bringing more noise and other adverse impacts to airport neighborhoods. If airports can revise their approach to take the currently unrecognized key factors into account, they can significantly improve relationships with their surrounding communities. If they continue to carry on as they have been, with limited options for authentic participation, airport conflicts are likely to worsen.

## Conclusions

Over the past 40 years, airports have become more open and transparent to their surrounding communities, particularly when engaging in federally funded studies or projects that require community involvement. While much progress has been made, there is a need for both a greater commitment to genuine public participation (rather than just meeting the technical requirements of the funding grant) and a more refined use of the outreach tools available. Rather than using the same mechanisms for every situation – public open houses, ad hoc committees without decision-making power, and public hearings – airports need better information to help them decide which methods are most appropriate for their situation. Community assessment tools such as focus groups and surveys have been used, but the data is not typically analyzed using conflict frameworks that consider multiple levels and types of issues. A more thorough evaluation of the existing situation would enable airports and their consultants to craft flexible, responsive community involvement programs.

Once airports open up and engage communities in sustained and transparent dialogue, the limitations on airport power to remedy their neighbors' problems will become evident. This is not to say that airports are currently doing all they could; there is much room for improvement in their responsiveness to citizen priorities. However, after the airport has done all it can, there will

remain much work requiring political will at the regional or even federal level. Airport-community relations committee should include all stakeholders such as regulatory agencies, local governments, regional publics and political representatives, some of whom do not currently participate in airport public participation efforts. Most airports want better outreach systems and there is every indication that improved designs for community involvement programs would enjoy widening acceptance over time.

Addressing problems between airports and communities will require changes in the attitudes and practices by both airports and the communities that host them. Actions can be taken independently but, ultimately, they must be woven together in a new set of processes for shared communication and cooperation.

To improve the effectiveness of community involvement efforts, three key goals must be met. First there is a need to recognize and address the challenge of different values and lack of normative consensus between the airport and the surrounding community. Second, there must be a de-escalation of existing conflicts and installation of mechanisms that will minimize polarization and its destructive effects. Third, structural problems in the nexus between airport and community must be recognized and long-term solutions crafted through cooperative efforts of all affected parties – airports, neighbors, regulatory agencies, local governments, regional publics and regional political systems.

As part of this, airport neighbors could become better educated about the realities of who controls what in airport operations, and who wields the power necessary to make changes. This would enable them to act more effectively to drive change. All parties to the dispute should have representatives at the table when decisions are being made. Such a program might require that the FAA send representatives (they often do, but not

always), that local governments and businesses participate, and that those who represent the larger regional interests take responsibility for the sacrifices of those living closest to the airport. This would increase the level of awareness in the region to the problems near the airport and, potentially, generate the political will (and resources) to help solve the problems. For example, sound insulating homes near airports has proven to be very effective at protecting occupants from adverse noise impacts, but funding is limited. If the costs could be shared by the region that benefits from the airport, perhaps more homes could be sound insulated. Even more important, zoning ordinances and planning documents should reflect the presence of airports so that homes and noise sensitive facilities are not built in areas where aircraft noise will become a problem. To address noise at the source, regional transportation plans that take quality of life into account could direct heavy air traffic away from airports with substantial residential development toward facilities with more compatible development.

## Recommendations

Improvement in community involvement efforts by airports can be accomplished through the following proven means:

### Establish Standing Committees on Airport-Community Relations

Standing Airport-Community Relations Committees should comprise diverse interest groups/individuals such as airport staff members, airline/cargo service and pilot association representatives, local planning and zoning departments, local and state elected representatives, the FAA region and air traffic control tower staff, citizen associations, business groups and individual neighborhood

residents. The few existing committees of this type that currently operate in airport communities have proven to be very effective at keeping citizen values and norms on the table when important decisions are being made. Furthermore, by bringing all stakeholders to the table, these committees begin to address the structural problems of fragmented control and inequitable distribution of the adverse impacts of airport operations. Unfortunately, most of the existing committees are neither efficient in decision-making nor calm and judicious in discussion. However, they exist now and they do produce measurably better results.

### Implement Permanent, Ongoing Outreach Punctuated by Increased Activity During a Growth Project or Noise Study

When public outreach only occurs during a proposed project or defined study, opportunities are lost to lay a foundation of good communication prior to the time when controversial decisions must be made. The survey results showed that one predictor of a satisfactory study outcome was a good relationship between an airport and the community before the process started. Therefore a firm airport commitment to ongoing outreach is strongly recommended. Formal continuing outreach programs provide community members far better opportunities to learn about airports and establish positive relationships with airport officials, and also for both to anticipate issues that will likely arise as growth occurs and communicate proactively before issues become controversial. When growth projects are proposed or noise studies are undertaken, the existence of ongoing outreach mechanisms and processes will greatly reduce the level of controversy and opposition to the proposed project or noise study recommendations.



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