'Rude' O'Hare awakening: Sleep-deprived residents unload on City Aviation commissioner - Chicago

Written By Rosalind Rossi Posted: 01/08/2016, 06:30pm
Citizens angry about new O'Hare Airport jet noise disrupting their sleep unloaded on the city's aviation commissioner Friday for repeatedly leaving noise commission meetings early, before any public participation session.

The first outburst of clear irritation occurred in a foyer outside the O'Hare Noise Compatibility Commission meeting room, as Chicago Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans headed out the door.

“Once again, I had four hours of sleep!” Arlene Banas, of Chicago’s 41st Ward, angrily snapped at the fleeing commissioner.

Banas said committee meetings had devolved into a “dog and pony show” by Evans’ failure to stick around and listen to the public.

“Can’t you stay for community comments?” Jimmy Nuter, of Norridge, asked as Evans
Nuter said his Mayfair home sees as many as 600 to 700 O'Hare flights a day overhead, ruining his sleep. He called Evans “rude.”

Unlike her predecessor, Rosemarie Andolino, Evans has actually attended noise commission meetings since becoming city aviation commissioner last June and inheriting a wellspring of anger over a dramatic October 2013 shift in O'Hare flight paths.

However, Evans routinely leaves before the public comment section of each meeting.

Evans tries to attend “as many meetings as she can for as long as she can” but had some other meetings Friday morning, her spokesman, Owen Kilmer, told a reporter after Friday's meeting.

Evans’ plan to spread out night jet noise more evenly and other O'Hare proposals prove she is “very sympathetic” to resident complaints, Kilmer said.

But several citizens Friday didn’t see it that way.

“We do not get respect from the commissioner. She’s left every meeting early,” Nuter told the noise commission during its public participation session.

“This is so indicative of how the citizens of Chicago have been treated,” Steve Brick, of Chicago, chimed in. “At every turn, we are ignored.”

Brick said Evans and the noise commission chair, Arlene Juracek, were literally turning their backs on residents. They and others sit with their backs to the audience, sometimes making it difficult for the public to hear what's being said or know who is speaking, he said.

“We go to all these meetings and the citizens are sitting in the back, looking at your backs,” Brick said. “Up until now, we have been completely ignored. I for one am not going to stand for it.”

Brick said he might not be so angry if not for the fact that the last thing he heard at night – and the first thing that woke him at 3 a.m. – was an O'Hare jet.

“This is the hell we are living under,” Brick said. “The citizens of Chicago are fed up.”

Commission members Friday were given an update on how an ad hoc committee of their group was reviewing proposals to spread out night jet noise by rotating O'Hare runways used at night on a regular basis and using less populated flight corridors.

However, city consultants have made clear that the current number of flights from 6 a.m. to 7 a.m. and from 10 p.m. to 11 p.m. demand more runways than voluntary fly-quiet rules require. Therefore, they say, different fly-quiet rules should be established for those hours.

A key goal of the ongoing $8.7 billion conversion of the O'Hare airfield from mostly diagonal runways to mostly east-west parallel ones is to better accommodate more flights.
But the fallout has been that since October 2013, residents east and west of the airport have been bombarded with new jet noise.

Since the big switch, the growth in jet noise complaints, especially in Chicago, as been explosive and has won O’Hare the distinction of racking up the most jet noise beefs — by a landslide — among the nation’s 10 largest airports, a Chicago Sun-Times/Better Government Association investigation has shown.

Data released Friday indicated that from January through November of 2015, the city received a record 3.7 million O’Hare noise complaints — 170 times more than during all of 2012, which was the last full year before flight paths changed. However, November saw fewer complaints (351,873) and complainants (50,862) than October.

One citizen contended Friday that there are other ways to address jet traffic besides using more runways during shoulder hours than current fly-quiet rules require.

“There’s an alternative: restrict demand,” 41st Ward resident Frank Gagliardi told the commission. “There are other places that do this.”

Also Friday, Ald. Anthony Napolitano (41st) told the commission that he wrote Mayor Rahm Emanuel on Dec. 21, saying he wanted to replace Emanuel-appointee Catherine Dunlap as the ward’s representative on the noise commission, but has yet to hear back.

Emanuel has the final say in naming or replacing commission members.

Napolitano said he’s attended every commission meeting since his April election, and has always been given a seat at the commission table and a name placard, along with Dunlap. But at his first appearance since asking to replace Dunlap — on Friday— suddenly he was denied a seat at the table, Napolitano said.

“As the elected official of the 41st Ward, I feel it is time for a change and I can best represent the ward in this fight on noise and pollution,” Napolitano said.

City to tax off-site parking companies at O’Hare and Midway

written by Fran Spielman posted: 11/12/2015, 11:04am

Air travelers and the loved ones who pick them up have been able to cut their costs by parking at off-site garages and riding shuttles to O’Hare and Midway Airport terminals, but those bargains are about to shrink.
On Thursday, the City Council’s Aviation Committee approved a long-stalled ordinance empowering the city to slap parking companies that have set up shop just outside both airports — in some cases outside the city to avoid paying a parking tax that Mayor Rahm Emanuel loves to raise — with a tax of on ten percent of their gross revenues.

The mayor’s ordinance authorizes Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans to “negotiate and execute” five-year agreements with any off-airport parking service provider that uses airport roadways or other airport facilities to pick up, drop off or otherwise serve customers” at either airport. Those companies would be prohibited from using airport roadways and facilities without such an agreement.

Jessica Sampson, general counsel for the city’s Department of Aviation, said the tax would also apply to hotels that offer parking to their guests and shuttle them to O’Hare and Midway.

The “access fee and/or concession fee” was initially pegged at 12 percent, but reduced in negotiations between the companies and the city. That’s why company lobbyists, including former State Rep. Robert Molaro (D-Chicago) representing Wally Park, testified in favor of the tax.

The costs are almost certain to be passed along to consumers in the form of higher rates.

And that’s what bothers Ald. Ray Lopez (15th).

“When I see people coming the the airport, they are watching every dime,” Lopez said. “For everyday families struggling to take their children on a trip, another ten percent could be the difference between going on a trip or not.”

Aviation Committee Chairman Mike Zalewski (23rd) countered that it’s about time that the free ride end for companies like Inter-Park and Wally Park now offering bargain parking rates — in some cases, one-third of what you’d pay at O’Hare’s main parking garage — and clogging airport roadways with their shuttle vans and buses.

“It’s like $30-a-day at the main garage. These off-site garages are like $10-a-day. The shuttle is free. It’s a lot cheaper, but you have to hop on a bus,” Zalewski said.

“There is a cost to maintaining airport roadways. You have to either fix them, repave them, clean them or remove the snow. To offset some of those costs, all airports have been charging these lots a percentage of gross revenues. O’Hare and Midway have never charged. We’re just catching up.”

Sampson said an analysis conducted by the city in conjunction with World Business Chicago showed that, of the top fifteen airports nationwide, O’Hare is second in outbound enplanements, but only tenth in ground transportation revenue. Based on 2014 revenues, the ten percent tax is expected to generate $2.7 million-a-year. That’s 10 percent of the city’s $20.7 million annual spending on airport roadway maintenance.

“We’re the only airport system that does not have that capability. That’s something we believe we need to capture,” Sampson said.
For air travelers and their loved ones who chose to pay more for the convenience of parking on the grounds of O'Hare and Midway, Emanuel's ordinance also authorizes Evans to establish an incentive-laden program to reward “frequent parkers.”

Premium services to be offered include a reservation system that would eliminate the need to aimlessly drive from floor-to-floor at O'Hare in search of a space you can’t find—provided you’re willing pay for the privilege.

Car washing, detailing and “light maintenance services” is also expected to be offered to business travelers and other frequent fliers.

The precise number of parking spaces that would be made available for reservation was not immediately known, nor was the reservation fee. O’Hare already offers valet parking for a much higher price. Sampson said reservations would be made either online or “potentially through a phone app.”

“This program is something we’re excited about. Not only does it encourage people to park at the airport. It generates additional tax revenue for the city,” she said.

Zalewski said the reservation and car repair services are not for everyone. But, there is definitely a market for it.

“A lot of business travelers will take advantage of that for the sheer convenience,” he said.

“Leisure travelers going on vacation tend to get to the airport two hours in advance. They relax. They get a bite to eat. But the business traveler tends to cut it close, time-wise. They run on a tight schedule. They would definitely take advantage of something where the parking space is more of a guarantee.”

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Chicago

Midway Airport getting 1,400 more parking spaces, new concessions and security checkpoints

written by Fran Spielman posted: 08/05/2015, 09:39pm

Two years after pulling the plug on a deal to privatize Midway Airport, Mayor Rahm Emanuel is taking the airport’s future into his “own hands” by confronting Midway’s biggest weaknesses and passenger annoyances: parking, security and concessions.
On Thursday, Emanuel took the wraps off a $248 million overhaul that will give Midway 1,400 more premium parking spaces, a Taste-of-Chicago-style concession makeover with more space and 27 security lanes, instead of 17, to unclog a notorious passenger bottleneck.

The dramatic increase in security checkpoints would be made possible by widening a pedestrian bridge over Cicero Avenue — from 60 feet to 300 feet. That will create an 80,000-square-foot “security hall” with 20,000 square feet of additional concession space.

Existing Midway concessions are also in line for a dramatic upgrade to improve, both the array of passenger choices and the technology used to deliver food and retail offerings. Spa services, lounge facilities, fine dining and medical services will be added.

All of the concessions will be turned over to a single operator chosen after a “request-for-proposals” (RFP) issued next month. The makeover is modeled after the concession overhaul at O’Hare Airport’s international terminal.

Midway’s main parking garage will be expanded sideways to include four additional floors with 1,400 more premium parking spaces. That will allow passengers to avoid time-consuming shuttle buses to remote parking. And it will give CTA Orange Line riders shelter from the elements.

All told, it’s the biggest upgrade of the Southwest Side airport since former Mayor Richard M. Daley’s $927 million reconstruction project that included a new terminal.

The plan will be bankrolled with revenues generated by the airline ticket tax and airport revenue bonds.

By 2019, it’s expected to double Midway’s $89.2 million in annual concession revenue while creating 1,000 temporary construction jobs and 700 permanent concession jobs.

Roughly 7,000 square feet of new concession space and more comfortable seating will come first. The parking garage and security hall will go out to bid in “about a year” with construction to follow, paving the way for additional concession space. The entire project is not expected to be completed until 2020.

Daley rebuilt Midway before putting it on the block, only to have the deal fall apart for lack of financing.

Emanuel’s plan to make a major investment in the one-square-mile airport-in-a-neighborhood doesn’t necessarily preclude privatization, either.

But at a news conference at Midway Thursday, the mayor slammed the door and swallowed the key.

“We’re going to take Midway’s future into our own hands. We’re going to modernize Midway with these investments. This modernization says that Midway will continue to operate the way it has been operating,” the mayor said.

Emanuel noted that customer spending at Midway is “$3-to-$4 below” what the average
airline passenger spends at competing airports.

“That is because the experience needs to be enhanced,” he said.

Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans said it’s pivotal for the city to “maximize non-airline revenues” to support the investments that airlines need to make “to grow their business.”

Equally important, she said, is to upgrade the “customer experience” at Midway.

“We want to have a broader retail offering. We want to have a little bit more quality food offering. More choices for passengers. Menus that change more quickly. We want to incorporate the use of technology into our concessions so that people can order online and pay online and get their food more quickly,” Evans said.

Does that mean ordering by smart phone or tablet and getting food delivered to passengers waiting at the gate?

“That will be one of the concepts that will be considered. You’ll hear me talk next week at O’Hare. We’re going to roll that out at O’Hare very quickly before we do” Midway, she said.

“But in this [Midway RFP], the tag line is, ‘We want innovation. We want the best products. We want the best services. We want the best technology in the country, in the world brought right here to Midway. It’s a significant improvement in the offering we have today.’

Ald. Mike Zalewski (23rd), chairman of the City Council’s Aviation Committee, said he can’t wait until the security checkpoint nightmare has been put to rest.

“When that bridge first opened, there weren’t as many lanes as there are now and we didn’t have the relationship with the TSA that we have now. There were six lanes there. And sometimes, three or four TSA security people would decide to go on break . . . and leave it down to two lanes,” Zalewski said.

“There have been times when the line has been all the way back to the Orange Line bus station. It was probably every bit of two blocks long. Until we got the TSA situation straightened out, many, many people missed their flights because they were in line too long.”

The 1,400 close-in parking spaces will also be a welcome respite, particularly for families traveling with young children.

“This garage is going to allow a lot more people to park right by the terminal and just come in without having to be shuttled over . . . It’s a few blocks away. It’s at 55th and Laramie, compared to right here attached to the terminal,” the alderman said.

“There’s a lot of people with kids when they’re traveling. You’ve got to get `em in the stroller. Put `em on that shuttle. Bring `em over. Like a rent-a-car situation. Here, they can just walk in.”

The upgrades showcased Thursday mark the latest chapter in Midway’s roller-coaster ride.
In 1992, Mayor Daley infuriated his Southwest Side political base by declaring plans to close Midway Airport within five years — after his now-defunct Lake Calumet Airport was up and running — and turn it into an industrial park.

Twelve years later, Daley joined the CEOs of ATA and Southwest Airlines to bask in the glow of the $927 million reconstruction project that turned an airport resembling a “ghost town” when Midway Airlines folded into one of the fastest-growing airports in the nation, serving 18.5 million passengers a year.

“I once called Midway the ‘comeback kid of airports.’ When you look around today, Midway’s story seems like Cinderella. Once taken for granted. A little shabby. Now, attractive and ready to move into the future,” Daley said on that day.

Daley’s Midway makeover nearly quadrupled the size of the passenger terminal, added 19 new gates and built a new customs facility that paved the way for direct international flights for the first time in 50 years.

Cicero Avenue was moved 2,300 feet to the east to ease traffic flow and improve airport access. The new Midway also has 50,000 square feet of restaurant and retail concession space, up from 18,200 square feet.

Artist’s rendering of a planned project at Midway Airport. | Provided rendering

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Aviation commissioner meets with noise-weary residents near O’Hare

written by Fran Spielman posted: 06/29/2015, 06:49pm

Noise-weary residents around O’Hare Airport on Monday finally got the audience they’ve been seeking with Chicago’s aviation commissioner — and came away hopeful that their demand to save O’Hare’s criss-crossing, diagonal runways will be heard.

Newly appointed Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans last week appeared to slam the door on saving diagonal runways that the Fair Allocation in Runways coalition contends holds the key to a more equitable distribution of flights.

“First and foremost, O’Hare’s triangular runway pattern — with runways in three directions — has to go. … It is inefficient, outdated and, frankly, not as safe a configuration. … These new parallel runways are essential for maximizing safety at our busy airports,” Evans told the City Club of Chicago.

Evans was singing a different tune Monday.

At the first of at least three meetings with O’Hare-area residents and their elected officials mandated by state law, the new commissioner not only listened to their complaints about a barrage of jet noise that keeps people awake at night and forces them to keep their windows closed and air-conditioners on, no matter how cool it gets.

Evans also opened her mind to FAIR’s demands. Chief among them is a pledge not to decommission any of four criss-crossing diagonal runways, even after a new parallel runway opens later this year. Killing off any diagonal runways could shift even more flights over city residents east of O’Hare already complaining about a bombardment of new jet noise.

Another key demand is to halt an October 2013 take-off and landing plan in favor of a “fair allocation of runway traffic between existing and new runways” for both daytime and nighttime traffic.

“For the first time ever, the response was not, ‘No.’ It was not, ‘We’ll take it under advisement,’ which is the same as saying, ‘No.’ We actually got a response,” FAIR leader Jac Charlier said. “The response was ‘That’s an interesting idea. Let’s talk about that,’ or, ‘We can talk about that.’ That makes this meeting a success.”

“Unlike the previous commissioner, who did not grasp what it meant to talk with citizens, this commissioner responded to our questions and asked us questions back. That simple dialogue has never happened before — ever.”

Pressed on whether he’s concerned about the statement that Evans made to the City Club
last week, Charlier said, “When you have a person who makes two comments that are very different, the best thing to do is to continue to engage them in conversation. We always proceed from [the assumption that she is] being an honest broker.”

The closed-door meeting was held at the Chicago Department of Aviation’s offices on Zemke Road at O’Hare. Evans could not be reached for comment about the two-hour meeting.

Bensenville Village President Frank Soto agreed that removing the diagonal runways would make a bad situation infinitely worse.

“You’re reducing options how to fly. You’re concentrating all of your flights over specific communities. It doesn’t create balance or an equitable distribution,” Soto said.

Arguing that Bensenville is absorbing more than its fair share of flights, Soto said, “Some of my residents live within 3,500 feet of one of the most used runways. They’re not sleeping at night. It’s a very difficult quality of life. And we have one more runway expected to be completed in October that also faces Bensenville. That would create four runways impacting Bensenville.”

FAIR member Colleen Mulcrone said she was equally optimistic after the face-to-face meeting with Evans.

“We were given an opportunity to say all of the things we’ve proposed and to articulate [what] people are dealing with,” Mulcrone said.

“Diagonal runways due to be decommissioned hold the key. … In spite of what was said before, we have to look at this meeting as the starting point for that dialogue. You can’t have a dialogue if something is set in stone.”

Complaints about O’Hare jet noise have skyrocketed to record numbers since flight patterns were dramatically altered more than a year ago as part of the $8 billion O’Hare Modernization Program.

The big switch left Chicago and suburban areas immediately east and west of the airport suddenly bearing 70 percent of all O’Hare air traffic. Residents who never experienced heavy jet noise before contend they were blindsided by the blitz of new planes over their homes.

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Chicago

**New aviation chief: Double-decker Blue Line could carry express train to O’Hare**
An express train from downtown to O’Hare International Airport could be built on a second level of track above the CTA’s Blue Line, providing a first-of-its-kind “double-decker” service down the middle of the Kennedy Expressway, Chicago Aviation Commissioner Ginger Evans said Wednesday.

In a wide-ranging interview with the Chicago Sun-Times, Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s new aviation chief bubbled with ideas about how to improve service to and at O’Hare — an airport she described as “busting at the seams” and having “a lot of needs.” She also dismissed pursuing any privatization of Midway Airport as running down a “blind alley.”

Ideas for O’Hare included relocating concessions inside domestic terminals to a second-floor “mall” area; adding more gates at O’Hare, but not more terminals; and sticking with the six parallel east-west runways originally envisioned under the $8.7 billion O’Hare Modernization Program.

When it came to solving record complaints about O’Hare jet noise, Evans had no immediate answers, although she said she is ready to listen.

Evans said she will meet personally with the Fair Allocation in Runways coalition, as promised under a legislative resolution, to hear their ideas. But she could not yet say whether O’Hare should keep all four of its diagonal runways open to spread out air traffic more evenly, as FAIR has demanded.

In addition, Evans said Mayor Rahm Emanuel would not attend the three planned FAIR meetings — something legislators had to step in to finally achieve.

FAIR leader Jac Charlier said Wednesday “there are no surrogates for the mayor” on the jet noise issue and, after extending more than a dozen invitations to Emanuel, he expects the mayor to attend.

“This is my area of technical expertise. This is the reason I was hired,” Evans explained. “I will listen and evaluate.”

Emanuel has made high-speed rail to O’Hare one of the top priorities of his second-term agenda. During her confirmation hearing last week, Evans told aldermen she planned to start the discussion by examining options along the Kennedy Expressway.

But on Wednesday, she raised an entirely new idea: running express trains to O’Hare on a second deck above the CTA’s Blue Line. She said knocking out Kennedy travel lanes to hold tracks did not make sense.

“What we really would need to do would be to add capacity. You can go over the top structurally . . . and use the dedicated right-of-way that’s already there,” she said.

The fact that the CTA is already spending billions to build a project it calls “Your New Blue” is not an impediment, she said.
“Engineering is always an iterative process. You can never exactly build things so that the next phase doesn’t require some re-work,” Evans said.

Experts said such “double-decker” service to an airport would be the first of its kind in the nation — and perhaps the world. Evans has said a higher fare could be charged for the premium service.

But Rick Harnish of the Midwest High Speed Rail Association warned that the second “deck” of track would probably have to rise over about 10 bridges that currently carry cars over the Kennedy between downtown and O’Hare.

Plus, Harnish said, existing Blue Line tunnels, near downtown and near O’Hare, do not hold enough space to run extra track for an express train.

Evans is hoping to have the “framework” completed in the next four years. That includes a “concept design” and “financial structure we know works,” along with operating agreements with federal, state and local agencies, she said.

She called the project a prime candidate for a federal Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act loan reserved for projects of national significance that couldn’t be built otherwise.

“We need to be looking forward to being competitive 10 years from now, 20 years from now, 30 years from now and look at what services we need to attract those global business travelers and be on a par with other global gateway airports,” Evans said.

“If you look at Singapore and you look at [London’s] Heathrow and you look at Germany, having a premium rail service is definitely part of being part of an international premier gateway airport,” she said.

Evans also suggested the possibility of relocating concessions at O’Hare’s domestic terminals to a newly constructed, second-floor “mall” built in space currently occupied by offices.

That would allow space for a wider array of retail — including “higher-end” food and “activity offerings” like children’s play areas and game rooms — to occupy and entertain passengers and their children between flights.

In addition, it would create room for additional seating in gate areas that are so congested that passenger boarding queues stream into circulation areas, Evans said.

“The facility is kind of busting at the seams, particularly during peak periods,” Evans said. “Additional square footage means additional service. It’s as simple as that.”

Evans acknowledged that building a second-floor retail mall might require structural and mechanical changes that could drive up the cost. It may also be “possible in some areas and not in others.” But, she argued, it’s “absolutely a viable concept” that must be explored.

“Fifteen years ago, that was considered a non-starter. Everyone [assumed] that passengers
wouldn’t go up for concessions. That’s pretty much been debunked at Denver. They have a large number of mezzanine-level concessions that are extremely successful,” she said.

To reduce O’Hare delays, Evans talked about creating de-icing areas so planes do not monopolize gates during de-icing and adding more gates via “modules and pods” rather than a new terminal.

Evans’s expertise in delivering big-ticket projects is one of the biggest reasons Emanuel hired her to replace former Aviation Commissioner Rosemarie Andolino.

As vice president of engineering for the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, Evans was charged with overseeing Reagan National and Dulles International Airports, construction of the Silver Line Metrorail project and maintenance of the Dulles Toll Road.

She joined the Washington airport authority last year after serving as vice president for the global aviation practice at Parsons Corp., an engineering and construction giant.

Wearing a crisp black dress and sensible shoes, Evans looked like a no-nonsense, get-it-done-yesterday executive who will work well with a mayor who appears to be in a perpetual race against time.

As for the privatization of Midway Airport, Evans said she’s not about to go down that road again.

The idea has failed twice now: once for lack of financing under Mayor Richard M. Daley, the second time after Emanuel pulled the plug when only two bidders left the runway.

Although it might raise revenue, so would increasing the vitality of Midway, Evans said.

“I don’t see any reason to revisit [privatization of Midway]. . . . We’ve been down that path twice. It’s a very big distraction of time and resources,” she said and the idea “has proven to be a blind alley in the past.”

Noting that Midway is “at the bottom” among top 30 U.S. airports in both retail and food and beverage sales per passenger, she said, “There’s lots of ways the city can benefit from continued growth and improvements at Midway and we need to pursue all of those very vigorously.”

Evans said she also hopes to take the O’Hare Modernization Program over the finish line by convincing major airlines to bankroll an extension of an existing east-way parallel runway and to add another runway that airlines say they can’t afford and don’t need.

“We absolutely have to have a six-parallel runway system. There’s no question about that. There’s a lot of other components to OMP that we need to re-evaluate in terms of their sequence, in terms of their value, in terms of their cost estimate and in terms of exactly how we would achieve those goals. I’m very anxious to do that with the airlines and I have no doubt that we’ll have an outcome we can all agree on,” she said.

“There haven’t really been discussions in a very long time. . . . Two years is a long time in this
business. Activity is up. Their profits are up. They have to grow. They’re in a different situation today than they were two years ago — a much different situation. There’s definitely an opportunity there.”

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