



Wednesday, June 6, 2007 - 12:00 AM

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Snohomish County opinion

## Paine expansion foes encouraged

By Gregory W. Hauth

Special to The Times

Should scheduled commercial air service come to Paine Field in Snohomish County? South Snohomish County communities asked this question more than 30 years ago. We received an answer in 1978 when Snohomish County promised to "discourage" scheduled air service at Paine Field.

That promise, embodied in a document called the Mediated Role Determination (MRD) agreement, has been reviewed and reaffirmed periodically over these past three decades. It is the basis for rezoning thousands of acres to develop homes, churches and schools. A special panel created in May 2005 by Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon reviewed the MRD yet again. The panel hired a prominent law firm to determine its legality in view of Federal Aviation Administration regulations and laws passed after the MRD's enactment.

A report just issued by the county says that nothing in the MRD is illegal or contrary to current laws and regulations. Why? Because the MRD states that the county may "discourage" air carriers. The MRD's validity derives partly from the "discourage" language, since the word "prohibit" crosses a bright line, legally speaking.

We can discourage. We cannot prohibit. This has been our approach for the 30 years.

Some received the county's report as a major news announcement, declaring victory for air service proponents. Dig deeper into the report and one can find key points for those who want to maintain our quality of life by maintaining the current role of Paine Field.

First, here's the really big headline news: Our county government wants to continue to keep its promise! Our county is willing to stick by the original promise it made through the MRD, which is now a certifiably valid document.

Here's more big news. In its final MRD panel report, the county stated, "Airlines can be charged the cost of infrastructure, capital improvements and necessary environmental mitigation." This is enormously important. The county has no obligation to subsidize commercial air service, nor does the county have any appetite for accepting costs imposed on it. Air carriers need to pay direct costs for infrastructure such as terminals, parking and security.

Carriers should pay indirect costs, too, for environmental mitigation, noise mitigation for our local schools, pollution assessments and possibly lost taxes from property-value degradation. If the business model for air carriers depends heavily on pushing direct or indirect costs onto local communities — then it's a failed business model.



MIKE SIEGEL / THE SEATTLE TIMES  
Paine Field stretches from its 180-foot-high control tower on a clear, sunny day.



Gregory W. Hauth

Some local business leaders formed a group called the Private Enterprise Coalition (PEC) to "encourage" and entice scheduled air service at Paine Field. They like the failed business model requiring taxpayer subsidies. Never mind the costs to the county, homeowners, schools and the environment. Scheduled air service at Paine Field is the only solution they can think of to more rapidly develop their commercial land for their profit. Why count the downsides if you don't plan on paying for them?

PEC argues that we need scheduled service because Seattle-Tacoma Airport is too crowded. Remember: Sea-Tac has a third runway coming online in about two years at a cost of about \$1.2 billion. Investments in terminal and airport capacity, higher seat utilization and e-ticketing have improved flow and capacity. The region has invested another \$2.1 billion in a new light-rail system that will contribute to improved transportation to and from Sea-Tac.

Have we spent enough yet? Maybe not, since one estimate by our group, Save Our Communities, reckons that commercial air service at Paine Field could impose more than \$1.5 billion of direct and indirect costs.

The MRD's promise strikes a perfect balance for Paine Field's role. It supports economic development in partnership with the world's best aerospace industry; it supports general aviation; and it supports the quality of life in our communities by — what's the word? — "discouraging" scheduled air service.

Opponents like PEC would destroy our quality of life using failed business models that subsidize scheduled commercial air service. We don't want it. We don't need it. Now we have confirmation that we don't have to pay for it.

*Gregory W. Hauth is the vice president of Save Our Communities, a group formed to oppose expansion of Paine Field. He resides in Mukilteo.*

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