

What's Going on with Flight Patterns and Aircraft Noise from Washington Reagan National Airport?

You may have noticed an increase in commercial airlines flying directly over our neighborhood. In response to an Alexandria Federation of Civic Associations inquiry, Lisa Goldberg, from Alexandria's Office of Environmental Quality and Stephen Thayer, the Mayors representative to the Washington Reagan National Airport Aircraft Noise Community Working Group, addressed the associated issues; as well as, what individual citizens can do.

Myth Busting

There is some misinformation regarding Washington Reagan National Airport (DCA) operations and the authority of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority. What you need to know:

- DCA and Dulles (IAD) are the only two U.S. airports owned by the federal government.
- DCA and IAD are authorized to operate around the clock (24-hours/7-days).
- Congress controls the number of slots (arrivals and departures per hour); distance aircraft can fly from DCA (aircraft type); and flights between 10 pm and 7:00 am.
- The FAA regulates aircraft procedures (flight paths and altitudes).
- No entity regulates noise output of aircraft in flight.
- National Security determines no fly zones within DC airspace (currently the National Observatory and the National Mall).

The original operational concept was IAD would be the long-haul airport and DCA would be restricted to shorter regional flights limited to a range of 650 miles. Congress changed the distance to 1200 miles and more recently amended the DCA authority to allow slots exceeding 3000 miles to facilitate flights to Los Angeles, San Francisco and Seattle. Another factor as to why more flight slots are being authorized out of DCA is cost. IAD operating costs far exceed DCA and BWI; this translates into lower fares and increased public demand for DCA sourced flights.

Noise Factor

Emerging aircraft technologies will continue to abate noise levels; however, atmospheric remain the greatest factor impacting noise levels. The majority of modern aircraft now comply with night time noise rules. American is eliminating MD-80 service at DCA (among the loudest engines) and Delta will eliminate scheduled MD-80 operations after 3:00 pm. However, as more night slots open it will have the effect of increasing noise impacts. Unfortunately, the Airport Noise and Capacity Act of 1990 limits U.S. airports from imposing new noise-based operational restrictions. Moreover, Congress's preferences for flying in and out of DCA impedes all initiatives to limit expansion introduced by Virginia and Maryland congressional delegations.

Flight Patterns

There are several factors influencing increased flights over Alexandria and specifically our neighborhood. The demand for increased slots between 10:00 pm and 7:00 am is the first. South flow arrivals and departures but mainly departures are another. When planes take off from north to south, they are generally required to fly past the Wilson Bridge before initiating a turn. Flights going east fly along the

east bank of the Potomac River and westbound planes follow the west bank over Old Town. Nearly two thirds of flight out of DCA are westbound. Occasionally Air Traffic Control (ATC) directs flights to deviate from the established turning point and initiate the turn prior to passing over the bridge. This can be due to weather, wind changes requiring a reversal in the approach and departure patterns (south to north) or because of congestion. DCA is also the first airport to fully implement the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen). NextGen integrates ground, air and satellite based GPS technology, replacing radar as the primary means for air traffic management. The system improves airspace safety and efficiency but it also modifies procedures in the D.C. airspace metroplex; and flight paths concentrated over certain communities, chiefly Alexandria, Arlington, Prince Georges and Montgomery Counties.

Remedies

The Metropolitan Airports Authority established the Washington Reagan National Airport Noise Community Working Group in October 2015 with 15 voting members, Prince Georges and Montgomery Counties were added in 2016.

- **Mission:**
 - Identify and implement noise-mitigation solutions for National Airport Airplane Traffic over surrounding communities
- **Focus Areas:**
 - Flight paths (more time over water, less time over land)
 - Noise Abatement
 - Altitude—arrival departing flights
 - Airport Hours of Operation
 - Roles/Responsibilities of Airport/Airlines/FAA
 - Emerging Aircraft Technologies
 - DCA Night Noise Rule (limitations and enforcement)
 - Moving Flights from National to Dulles
- **Alexandria Focus Areas:**
 - Increased air traffic at night (10:00 pm – 7:00 am)
 - Concentration of flight path of departing aircraft over the west bank of the Potomac River
 - Deviation from the official flight path through Air Traffic Control diversions allowing aircraft to turn right before the Wilson Bridge

Progress

Working with the FAA the Working Group is making progress:

- Increased air traffic control vigilance against diversions over Alexandria
- Recommendation to FAA to modify south flow departures from the western shore of the Potomac River to:
 - River center
 - Extending the turning point 3.9 miles south of the current turn near the Wilson Bridge
- Influence the FAA Rulemaking process which will begin in August 2017; technical evaluations will take 12 – 18 months

Citizen Action and Points of Contact

WebTrak: Provides near real time (hour delay) tracks of in and outbound airlines. If you see a plane flying over the neighborhood you can see the flight path over a map, click on the aircraft symbol and it will display airline, flight number, origin and destination, speed, type aircraft.

<http://webtrak5.bksv.com/dca>

Fill out an online complaint form:

<https://complaints.bksv.com/dca>

Contact the Airport Noise Office: Mike Jeck

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Contact the City of Alexandria: Lisa Goldberg, Office of Environmental Quality

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