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Tension mounts over Navy jet noise

BY TIMOTHY O'HARA

Citizen Staff

As another type of fighter jet is about to begin training over the Navy base on Boca Chica Key, little has been done to resolve neighbors' concerns about the current class of fighter jets that pilots fly while training there.

Nearly two months ago, the Navy promised to hold a public meeting to discuss changes to its Air Installation Compatible Use Zones, so-called "AICUZ maps" that show areas of high noise and accident potential, where development is dissuaded.

No meetings have been held.

The Navy in July asked the County Commission to approve the maps and set land-use guidelines that would restrict development in the high noise and accident areas. The board declined at the recommendation of Growth Management Director Andrew Trivette. Instead, County Commissioner Dixie Spehar asked the Property Appraiser's Office to create online maps or tag properties in the offending zones.

That has not been done, either.

Some residents who live around the base are increasingly frustrated by the noise, and the issue has attracted the attention of the Keys-based environmental group Last Stand, which successfully has sued the local, state and federal government on various issues regarding endangered species and quality of life.

An attorney for Paul Caruso, who organized the Lower Keys group Stop The Planes, has been in discussions with attorneys in Virginia who filed a lawsuit to block jet training at the Oceana Naval Air Station in Virginia Beach. The suit ended with a settlement and the Navy agreeing to pay \$34 million to 2,100 homeowners, who claimed the 1998 arrival of the F/A-18 Hornets had devalued their homes and subjected them to substantially louder noise.



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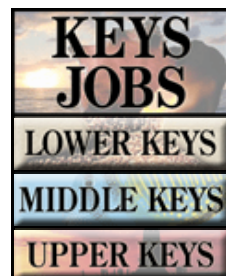
Nena Guzman, fourth grade, Montessori Elementary Charter School

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Key West attorney Bob Goldman, who represents Caruso's group, has "not ruled out filing a lawsuit," he said.

The issue also has raised concerns about fairness and socioeconomic discrimination, as jets fly over mobile-home park and blue-collar neighborhoods on Stock Island, but no longer over tony properties in Key Haven. The Navy contends the maps were changed to more accurately reflect where pilots actually fly — having been instructed for decades not to fly over more residential areas, like Key Haven.

The Property Appraiser's technicians have discussed online maps and tagging properties, but are awaiting more information from Navy officials, Computer Department Supervisor Rob Shaw said Friday. If the Navy and county maps line up, the project could take a week to complete, Shaw said. If they don't, the process could take a month.

Retired Navy pilot and Key Largo resident John Hammerstrom last week issued a report that is critical of the Navy's handling of the map changes and questions whether the Navy fulfilled all of its environmental impact requirements before making the changes. Of the 1,000-page report about the F/A-18 Super Hornets — an upgrade that arrived in Key West in 2004 — and their impact on neighborhoods along the East Coast, "Key West was not evaluated," Hammerstrom wrote.

The report calls for better dialogue between the Navy, county and area residents, and asks the Navy to "appoint a well qualified AICUZ officer and launch a sincere community outreach program (expressly not a public relations campaign) to address the very real concerns of their host," the report reads.

"The Navy has not yet done their part to inform the public of the increased noise and what can be done about it," Hammerstrom said. "Anecdotal evidence indicates that the noise is spilling over the published noise zones. Many folks who bought outside of the AICUZ are now effectively inside it. The county and the Navy have a terrific, but short-lived opportunity to seek common ground and defuse this issue."

Last Stand received a copy of Hammerstrom's report and discussed it at its meeting Monday. The group did not vote to formally endorse the report, but it has designated a board member to work with Hammerstrom.

"He has a lot of good analysis of the issue," said Last Stand board member Dennis Henize, who has been tapped to work with Hammerstrom. "The issue certainly has our interest. In concept, we agree with his [Hammerstrom's] points."

After issuing his report, Hammerstrom also questioned why Air Force F-22A Raptor planes were invited to train over Boca Chica without being factored into the noise and danger maps. Pilots from the 94th Fighter Squadron at Langley Air Force Base in Virginia are slated to train at Boca Chica from Sept. 14 through 24.

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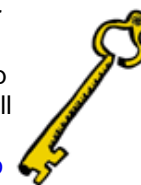


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The scale of Raptor operations is not sufficient to require AICUZ revisions, Naval Air Station Key West spokesman Jim Brooks said.

"The F-22 does not conflict with the AICUZ," Brooks said. "The F-22 is a visiting aircraft and its small number of operations at NAS Key West does not affect the overall average for AICUZ noise contours."

Langley Air Force Base spokeswoman Beth Gosselin maintains the jets are not louder than F-15 Eagle fighter planes. However, Gosselin did not have information on the exact decibel level produced by the F-22 Raptors.

"We've found that the number of noise complaints since the arrival of the F-22s is similar to the number received in previous years concerning the F-15," Gosselin said. "Next week we will release our latest AICUZ findings, which are comparable to the data prior to F-22 operations at Langley."

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