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Navy answers jet noise questions Tuesday

BY TIMOTHY O'HARA
Citizen Staff

The Navy will hold an informational expo on Tuesday to address questions about flight patterns around Naval Air Station Key West, but some question whether the military has chosen the best format for the forum.

Former Navy pilot and community activist John Hammerstrom argued the format will limit the dialogue between residents and the Navy. The Navy will offer individual question and answer sessions between residents and the people who helped craft the air station's Air Installations Compatible Use Zones (AICUZ), which maps noise and accident potential zones around the base. Pilots and sound experts also will be available.

Hammerstrom contends the Navy should hold a town hall meeting to openly address residents' complaints that the Navy has allowed noisier jets, F/A-18 Super Hornets, to come to Naval Air Station Key West. Criticism that flight patterns have changed, and more homes are impacted by noise, has increased since the Navy released its updated AICUZ in April.

The expo will not allow residents to interact as group with the Navy officials.

"It will manipulate the flow of information," Hammerstrom said. "It's a one-way flow of information."

The expo is designed to be a forum to provide the public with information, said Jim Brooks, spokesman for Naval Air Station Key West.

"It's not a town hall meeting," Brooks said. "We will be providing information. You can agree or disagree with us."

The expo comes as community and environmental groups are weighing in on the noise issue and demanding answers about who authorized changes to the AICUZ, which the Navy has asked the Monroe County Commission to approve as part of its development regulations. Key West City Manager Jim Scholl, commanding officer of the air station from 2003 to 2006, told The Citizen in July that the AICUZ reflects his direction to its creators that the maps must coincide with flight paths that pilots have flown for years.

On Thursday, the Upper Keys Citizens Associations sent the Navy

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a letter stating that "the Navy has not complied and met necessary and required environmental standards, impact and compatibility for the change," and "long established (1950s) communities on South Stock Island have been tremendously more impacted after the change."

"We support our neighbors' claim that without requisite prior public input, the 2007 AICUZ is invalid and that requested documentation provided by the Navy has been found to be less than accurate," said Michael Chenoweth, president of the Upper Keys Citizens Association.

The environmental group Last Stand also has asked questions about the how the changes will be explained. Navy officials addressed the group on Monday.

"What we want is the process to be public," Last Stand board member Dennis Henize said. "We want the county and the Navy to work together to come up with a plan. We have supported no encroachment into the AICUZ."

In July, Monroe County Commissioner Dixie Spehar asked her fellow commissioners to vote on adopting the Navy's updated AICUZ into land planning regulations. The commission balked and wanted more information on how the AICUZ changes were devised. The Navy then agreed to hold a forum and answer questions. Base commander Capt. J.R. Brown is drafting a letter answering questions, and it should be made public by Monday, Brooks said.

The County Commission adopted a previous AICUZ crafted by the Navy in 1977, but not a 2004 update. The Navy updated the maps again in the spring, with the latest version diverting flight paths away from the upscale community of Key Haven, but not the rest of Stock Island. Stock Island residents and others question why flight paths were diverted away from Key Haven, causing pilots to take a sharper turn on their approach to the runway.

The shift removed a swath of land from its previous position in a high-noise zone, which made residential buildings incompatible with Navy operations. Businessman Ed Swift has led an effort to build upscale homes in that area and neighboring Enchanted Island.

Some Stock Island residents believe the shift away from Key Haven, along with the introduction of louder jets at the Navy base, pushed more noise into their neighborhood.

"The people most deeply and unfairly impacted by this are the people who bought in good faith a home outside the published noise zone and now find themselves effectively inside the noise zone as a result of the increased noise of the Super Hornet," Hammerstrom said.

The city of Key West and Monroe County commissions will hold a public workshop on Dec. 5 to discuss adopting land use policies that would limit development in areas in and near the flight paths.

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