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County gives Navy voice on growth

BY TIMOTHY O'HARA
 Citizen Staff

Monroe County is considering a comprehensive plan change that would allow the Navy greater input on proposed development around its air station. The amendment, however, does not call for the county to sign off on a controversial change to the flight path maps for loud jet fighters.

The Development Review Committee on Tuesday will review Senior Planner Clarence Feagin's proposal for land-use maps to "include compatibility criteria and guidelines affecting land-use decisions near" Naval Air Station Key West, and for a Navy representative to serve as a non-voting member of the county Planning Commission. The Navy already has a representative who sits on that board full time, but the change would formalize the process.

"The procedure allows [Naval Air Station] Key West to provide comments on proposed land-use decisions adjacent to or near the military installation," the proposal reads. "The types of land-use decisions to be reviewed and commented on by NAS Key West are limited to changes to the comprehensive plan or land development regulations affecting density, intensity or use of land."

The state Department of Community Affairs (DCA), which regulates development in Monroe County, requires state and local governments to cooperate and exchange information about proposed development in areas around military bases so neighborhoods are not affected by noise or put at risk in the event of a plane crash. The state does not require local governments to sign off on Air Installations Compatible Use Zones (AICUZ) maps, which dictate jet fighter flight paths.

"DCA is requesting we do this," said County Commissioner Dixie Spehar, who represents the neighborhoods around the Boca Chica base. "This basically complies with Florida statutes. This is not an adoption of the AICUZ."

The recent change to the jet noise and danger zone maps has stirred controversy among residents in the Lower Keys, as the flight path was shifted away from the upscale community of Key Haven and not away from any other communities. Residents have challenged the change, saying it was done without the Navy conducting the proper environmental impact study. They also

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charge the Navy brought in the much louder F-18A Super Hornet in 2002 without receiving the input of the neighbors or conducting a noise study.

Neighbors have said jet noise has increased, with some saying it has become unbearable, in the past year to two years.

"They are asking the Navy to tell them what to do," Geiger Key resident Russ Scavelli said of the county. "If the county adopts what the Navy is saying, they will have property owners filing lawsuits about loss of property values. I will be one of them."

Navy base officials contend the AICUZ changes reflect a long public process that began in 2000 and involved open meetings and discussions with Monroe County planners. Capt. J.R. Brown, base commander, provided a timeline of events at a meeting last week designed to answer residents' questions about the AICUZ and jet noise.

Brown argued the recent noise complaints may have been generated from an increase in training at the air station in 2006 and 2007. Active hurricane seasons in 2004 and 2005 reduced the number of training flights in September and October, as seven storms brushed the Florida Keys during those two years. The 2005 hurricane season also damaged the base and limited training there.

The number of flights this year is below 2004 and 2003 levels, according to information provided by the Navy.

"This is a very good amendment," Navy base spokesman Jim Brooks said. "It's good for the Navy. It's good for the county. And it's good for the health, safety and well being of the residents. There is responsibility on both sides."

tohara@keysnews.com

Published on Wednesday, October 31, 2007

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