Mayor Carfora’s Live Statement 2023.04.1

FAA Hearing re EA Tweed New Haven Airport expansion

The Town of East Haven is paying careful and detailed attention to the proposed runway extension and the relocation and expansion of the terminal building (and associated facilities and infrastructure) that are the subject of the draft Environmental Assessment or EA that we are all here to discuss today.

We have consistently said that this project is the most transformative project in our town’s history. After a full review of the scope of the proposals and findings in the EA, we believe this statement is more accurate today than ever before.

We have been reviewing the EA with our team of professionals and will be submitting detailed written comments supported by independent expert review and analysis to the FAA. We believe the EA is legally deficient, and that it lacks essential substance, so much so that the FAA should remedy the deficiencies by either requiring a new EA or beginning the much more rigorous Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process to the benefit of all stakeholders.

As currently proposed, this project will negatively impact the quality of the human environment for people in East Haven, in New Haven, in Branford, in Guilford and in other nearby communities. I am here to speak for the people of East Haven but all people in this area will suffer the effects of this project as proposed.

I would like to address, in the short time I have, just a few of the profoundly problematic aspects of the EA.

The EA Contains a Fundamental Inconsistency that Infects the Environmental Analysis

The EA contains a fundamental inconsistency which undermines every aspect of the document:

The beginning of the document is filled with references to how totally inadequate the existing facilities at Tweed are to handle current air traffic -- much less any expansion.

The second half of the document carelessly assumes that the existing facilities can not only handle existing air traffic, but could handle 3.5 times the number of passengers enplaning at the airport today -- or a whopping 1.2 million enplaning passengers which actually means almost 2.5 million enplaning and deplaning passengers per the forecasts contained in the EA.

These assertions in the EA cannot both be true: either the existing facilities are inadequate to handle projected traffic increases – and therefore will constrain the amount of future traffic (and, critically, environmental impacts) – or the existing facilities can handle the projected traffic increases, and the new facilities are not really needed.

This fundamental disconnect allows the EA to reach the startling – and implausible – conclusion that there will be greater environmental impacts from a no-build scenario than if the project were to proceed as proposed.

This analysis is clearly unreliable and needs to be corrected to address the relevant issues honestly and consistently.

The Scope and Size of the Project is Fundamentally Incompatible with the Community

As a threshold matter, it is important to note that the magnitude of change associated with the sheer size of the proposed new facilities and the forecast number of enplanements and vehicle traffic is vastly beyond what we were initially told to expect. We continue to be presented with important information regarding the project at the last minute and without any meaningful opportunities for input, other than this forum, to date. Importantly the project as presented continues to change in material and important ways. For instance:

Original estimates of cost associated with construction of the project have ballooned from $60 million to the current $165 million.

Parking facilities were originally proposed to accommodate 1,700 vehicles at peak, but the EA now envisions an additional 4,000 vehicle spaces and a six-story parking garage which is elevated due to its location in a flood plain.

The size of the proposed terminal has increased from a minimum of 30,000-70,000 square feet to approximately 80,000 square feet. I also note that the Master Plan that was published a few short years ago explicitly contemplates an expansion of the existing terminal building, a possibility that is not contained in the EA.

The forecasted number of passengers expected to enplane at the airport was originally estimated in the Master Plan at 82,273 for the year 2025. This of course was far surpassed in the year 2022 when the actual number of enplaning air passengers was 351,506. The current forecasts are for 665,334 enplanements in 2026 and 1,222,551 in 2031. This means that almost 2.5 million enplaning and deplaning passengers will be coming through Tweed Airport in 2031 if this forecast holds true.

The proposed project would result in a very different airport than the one that currently exists or even the one contemplated just a few years ago. Its placement in a sensitive coastal area replete with our most precious natural resources and surrounded, at least on the East Haven side, by designated Environmental Justice communities is frankly astonishing.

Even more astonishing is the flip assertion in the EA that the project would result in a cumulative environmental benefit to the community including “reduced noise and air emissions compared to the no action alternative”.

The Proposed New Airport Access Route Suffers from Severe Flooding that Makes it Impossible to Meet the Project’s Purpose and Need

The EA rejects the existing terminal as not meeting the purpose and need of the project to provide safe and efficient facilities, in part because it suffers from flooding from time to time (per the EA the existing terminal has flooded 2 times in 3 years). However, as the Town has informed the FAA and the Authority, the proposed new Airport main access route through the Town suffers severe flooding much more frequently, including, recently, two times in just two weeks. Not 2 times in 3 years.

Moreover, this flooding occurs at Hemingway Avenue at Coe Avenue and Short Beach Road -- a critical juncture through which virtually all traffic to and from the Airport would travel under the proposed plan. If this intersection is flooded, the route to and from the Airport is cut off.

In order to provide safe, reliable, and efficient ground access to the Airport, at a minimum, another access route must be provided. One alternative would be leaving the existing access road open to passengers.

Finally, while the EA claims to resolve the concerns of current Airport access traffic traveling through residential neighborhoods, this is not accurate. The new route simply moves the traffic from New Haven residential neighborhoods to East Haven residential neighborhoods. It is worth noting that the East Haven neighborhoods that are expected to take this burden are designated as Environmental Justice communities -- a designation that is intended to protect residents from exactly this kind of shifting of burden.

The Effect of the Project on the Physical Environment is Woefully Understated

I am going to very briefly highlight just a few of the impacts the project will have on the physical environment. Given the short period of time I have to speak I will leave it to our experts to more fully identify and address these issues.

The EA fails to address what the impact will be of placing the estimated 61,300 cubic yards of fill required for the construction of the project within a 100-year flood plain. This in an environment that is already subject to constant flooding that is expected to worsen as sea levels rise. I am told there is a realistic potential that the actual quantity of fill needed may be significantly higher, and that the issues associated with mitigating or otherwise addressing this amount of fill are terribly complex and challenging.

I’d also like to mention that even the stated levels of fill will result in a relentless convoy of at least 4,000 noisy, dusty dump trucks bringing this material to the Airport through the streets and neighborhoods of the Town. The impacts of this massive earth-moving enterprise are not mentioned in the EA.

In addition to the issues associated with fill, the EA estimates the direct loss of wetlands to be 9.3 acres and notes there will be an estimated increase in impervious surfaces at the airport of approximately 941,922 square feet or 21.62 acres which will result in a large volume of polluted stormwater runoff that must be managed. As with the placement of fill, all of these actions will have a profoundly negative impact on the surrounding environment exacerbating already severe flooding issues and harming adjacent wetlands and other precious coastal resources.

Impacts on Parks and Community Events

We are also concerned with the very significant impacts on Town parks and the community activities held there that this project will have. This is especially true for the Town Green, located along Hemingway Avenue (at Main St. and River Street) – which would become the primary road for to the proposed new terminal – and the Town Beach.

The Town Green is the focal point of the East Haven Green Historic District which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is the heart of civic life in East Haven, where many events for families, youth, and seniors are held throughout the year, as well as annual all-Town events such as fireworks celebrations, our road race and the Fall Festival, now in its 30th year.

The EA gives absolutely no consideration to interference by heavy Airport traffic on Town and community functions at the Town Green or on the ability of the Town’s residents to access the Town Green on foot or by vehicle. I’ll leave it to other Town representatives to discuss in more detail how the increased traffic impacts will impact the Town Green.

Moreover, as with any beachfront community, the Town Beach is a very popular gathering place for recreation, especially in warm weather months. The impact of vastly increased overflights with heavier aircraft over the beach is not even discussed, much less analyzed, in the EA.

In Conclusion

Many good citizens are here, giving up their Saturday, in order to urge the FAA to do the right thing and simply follow applicable federal laws and regulations and require the preparation of an EA that meets standards or immediately move to the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement. An EIS will allow for fully informed decision-making, with meaningful consideration of the impacts of the proposed action based on adequate information and consideration of true alternatives. I applaud these citizens and thank them for their diligence and efforts.

The Town of East Haven will be providing detailed and comprehensive comments to the FAA within the next few weeks. We expect the FAA will be diligent in its review and consideration of all materials submitted and realize the deficiencies of the EA recently published.