

From: <llprescott@earthlink.net>
Date: Fri, Jul 29, 2022, 12:21 PM
Subject: Regarding the Middlebury Airport Master Plan
To: Louise Prescott <llprescott@earthlink.net>

CC: Vermont Agency of Transportation
FAA Office of Airport Planning
Middlebury Select Board
Office of Governor Phil Scott
Addison Independent
VTDigger
WCAX-TV
Sen. Ruth Hardy
Sen. Christopher Bray
Rep. Amy Sheldon
Rep. Robin Scheu

Hello,

I'm writing to express my concerns regarding the Master Plan currently under development for the Middlebury State airport. Let me preface this by saying that while I have been privy to some of the communications among the Middlebury Airport Neighborhood Association (MANA), they do not speak for me, nor I for them.

A little background: My husband and I bought a home at the corner of School House Hill and Burnham Drive in the spring of 2020. The runway is about 1500 feet from our front door, so clearly anything that happens at the airport matters a great deal to us. We knew the airport was there when we moved in. In truth, it's fun to watch the little planes come and go. Helicopters rattling the night are less pleasant, but operating under the presumption that these are emergency services or military operations and being a soldier's daughter, I understand the value of preparedness and won't quibble over necessities. In short, we've had no real issues with the airport as it has been since we moved in.

Last winter, we were approached by neighbors who alerted us to new developments, including Act 250 permit applications that were filed and approved after we moved in but for which we received no notice, as well as the pending Master Plan. The neighbor gave us some background information and suggested we send our questions and comments to various agencies involved. The responses we got were unhelpful at best.

Since then, watching the master planning process unfold has given me grave concerns, both in the details and in the process itself. I went through the plan in some detail, comparing it to relevant Act 250 permits, early Master Plan documents, and FAA materials. The numbers just don't add up. I work from home where I can usually see and/or hear every single flight operation. Our home is closer than Ross Conrad's yurt, which he described at the June 30 meeting. His observation was correct that traffic at the airport is nothing like the numbers in the current draft of the Master Plan. Indeed, the busiest summer days seldom reach anything close to what's suggested as a daily average.

As I understand it, the plan includes projections that derive from formulas that were based on estimates that have little basis in reality, past or future. There are no actual records of flight operations, based planes, parking fees, hangar rentals, but they're convinced we need more? How about hiring an intern to count the planes? Otherwise it's just making stuff up.

Numbers in various parts of the plan never seem to agree with other sources either. When the models were questioned during the June 30 meeting – why pick this formula over that one? – one of the consultants called it a matter of “opinion.” His analogy of “picking stocks” is a complete fallacy as most people would be looking for a return on their investment. The airport does not generate enough income to offset public cost, and there's no evidence that it ever will.

A fundamental change suggested in the Master Plan draft would facilitate nighttime operations. We're told the PAPI lights would only be visible to pilots, which seems dubious, and what about lights on the planes, themselves? What about the noise? Expanding the airport facilities to encourage nighttime operations is a pretty radical change, especially given the cost, the lack of documented demand, the potential impact on the neighborhood, and the fact that the airport is right next to a mountain where any visually impaired flight is fundamentally dangerous.

So who is all of this for? Why are so many public resources being poured into a facility that serves a very small number of people? Where's the cost benefit analysis? Why are taxpayers being expected to subsidize a facility that does not and probably never will cover the cost of its operation? We're told in one letter from VTrans that the airport provides dozens of jobs, and yet there are only 15 parking spaces? VTrans cited businesses that actually employ a small fraction of the numbers they mentioned. We're told the college and some of the local breweries “might” want to fly some dignitaries in for something, but none of those entities appear on the record as asking for any airport upgrades. Indeed, cavalier stewardship of the aquifer would pose a very real threat to their continued operation here. In response to concerns about risk to the local water supply, we're repeatedly told, without any specifics, “that's not a problem,” but when those reassurances come from the same people who used the phrase “tree trimming” to describe a clear cut that left not so much as a blade of grass standing while a one-time vernal pool at the southwest corner of Munson Rd and School House Hill is now a heap of wood chips and who mistook underground fuel tanks for surface ones, it's a little hard to find them credible. VTrans authorities also cited the Lemon Fair Insect Control District as an important user of the airport, yet by all reports, the Lemon Fair group ceased aerial spraying years ago. They don't even have a plane. Were they to recommence aerial spraying, it's unlikely they would ever do so at night. At best, we're looking at spending millions of tax dollars on the off chance that someday some unnamed person will, at some point, want to fly into town at night for what point and purpose no one can say. Seriously?

In a logical world, we would all recognize that, being next to a mountain, this was a poor location for an airport in the first place. It may have been fine for a few small cropdusters back in the day, but the unwarranted creeping scope of the airport is incompatible with the neighborhood that surrounds it. Given that hundreds of people live here and pay taxes to town, state, and federal governments, it seems clear that residential concerns should take precedence over a facility that costs too much and contributes very little.

Thank you for your consideration,
Louise Prescott
Middlebury, VT