

EDITORIALS

Understanding the Risks At East Hampton Airport

East Hampton Town should not seek or accept additional funding from the Federal Aviation Administration until there is agreement on what strings would be attached.

These conditions, or strings, could be significant. As best we understand it after listening to statements at hundreds of hours of meetings and reading and writing about airport battles for decades, there is a demonstrable, if slight, advantage if the town gets out from under the so-called grant assurances made in earlier deals with the F.A.A.

After all the talk, it boils down to this: Without grant assurances, the town would have a marginally better chance of success in imposing curfews and other noise-curtailling measures than it would if it continued to take federal money. Take the money, and the town may be committed to negligible control and a more difficult process if it tries to set its own landing and takeoff rules. In either scenario, the law requires any actions the town takes to be "reasonable, non-arbitrary, and not unjustly discriminatory." And, if a new rule goes into effect as expected, communities that have taken money from the F.A.A. may soon have an even greater hurdle to surmount.

Pilots en masse appear to support further ties to Washington based on the fear that a future town board could close the airport altogether in the absence of a federal contract to the contrary. Their anxiety has been fanned by special interests, such as the Eastern Region Helicopter Council, which paid for a study that hyped the airport's contribution to the local economy and further raised the specter of its being shut down. But this narrow view pits neighbors against resident aircraft owners, who are in effect acting as proxies for those who stand to profit from unfettered access — or those very fortunate few who prefer to arrive in their Gulfstreams at whatever hour of the day or night they please.

Noise-control advocates have been painted unfairly as "airport opponents." This is a convenient fiction based on the misperception that the Quiet Skies Coalition and others have a secret agenda. Sure, there may be one or two outliers for whom tearing up the tarmac sounds like a good idea, but the majority of residents here and in nearby towns would just like the airport to be less loud and its future growth limited. Unfortunately, by hardening their position, aviation interests may only be increasing the possibility of their own apocalyptic vision as community outrage rises.

Airport policy cannot be held hostage by those who put profit or personal convenience ahead of the common good. Any measures, no matter how small, that can aid in the fight against noise should be welcomed by all.