

# Newer LaGuardia flight paths cause pain in Flushing

Sound monitors show residents suffer from levels of plane noise considered unhealthy

by Laura A. Shepard, Chronicle Contributor | Posted: Thursday, April 30, 2015 10:30 am

Residents from all over Queens have complained about changes to air traffic patterns over the last few years. Among those heavily impacted are the people of Flushing, one of the borough's most densely populated communities, and one just east of LaGuardia Airport.

Susan Carroll lives on the 14th floor of a 16-story building in Downtown Flushing. She was born and raised in the neighborhood, where her family has lived for over 50 years. Now she worries that her home is no longer a safe and healthy place to live.

As a child, she hardly noticed planes. They typically flew over Flushing Meadows Corona Park, except for the week of the US Open, when they were temporarily rerouted over Downtown Flushing, flying what is known as the TNNIS route.

"I'm grateful that I grew up at a time when I was able to study and concentrate," Carroll said, recalling her years at Townsend Harris High School and Queens College. "I wonder how the kids deal with it now."



## *A change in flight paths means more noise*

"All of a sudden, in 2012, it wasn't temporary," Carroll said. The TNNIS route became permanent. At first it didn't really bother her because she left for work early every morning and returned at night, but when she was laid off in 2013 and began spending more time at home, she said, the situation was unbearable.

Dorothy Woo, a longtime Flushing resident and community activist, said the flights sometimes start before 6 a.m. and end after 11 p.m. or midnight.

"It's impossible to concentrate or enjoy life," Woo said. "I'm retired, so I stay home most of the time."

"People are always talking about leaving Flushing," Woo said. "I've been stuck here for 48 years. Now that I'm older it's more difficult to move out."

She explained that she and other senior citizens crave the convenience Flushing provides and don't have the energy to find another place.

"I don't want my house insulated so that I cannot go out." Woo said. "That is not our way of life."

Flushing is the first stop in America for many recent immigrants. Woo said that many are depressed by the noise, but people often say "I don't think we can fight the government" or "We can't move the airport anyway" or "This is too political, it's the elected officials' business."

"People are annoyed, but they accept it," Woo explained. "They know the problem but don't want to be involved. I've heard all kinds of excuses."

She said that she's been fighting since 1994, but the Federal Aviation Administration and the Port Authority, which operates LaGuardia, as well as Kennedy Airport, did not pay attention to complaints from the community until the group Queens Quiet Skies formed and people from North Queens and Nassau County began assisting with research and obtaining information. Many people have asked Woo, "Why is Flushing so quiet?" which she finds frustrating because she's been fighting for so long.

"Our elected officials have to understand that the airline industry is not the only thing New York or Queens people depend on," Woo said.

She criticized the government for being short-sighted and trying to find quick fixes.

"How can the airline industry do this to this dynamic town?" Woo asked.

She explained that paradoxically, industry is booming in Flushing and home values have not dropped.

Jan Tungin, a nurse who lives in Downtown Flushing, said that she's lived in the community for more than 20 years, and before 2013 it wasn't like this.

She calls the Port Authority complaint hotline often, sometimes every day, sometimes every two or three days. "As long as there's noise, I will complain," she said. Tungin has also complained to the office of Rep. Grace Meng (D-Flushing) and written letters to Gov. Cuomo.

Tungin said that she would not want to leave Flushing but if she were to buy another house or apartment, she would have to think about it.

"I can't have a quiet sleep," she said because sometimes she hears planes at 4 a.m. By 6 a.m. the planes are frequent, about 30 seconds apart all day, "like bombs" until late in the evening. "When the noise affects me, I can't do anything."

She continued, "I've been woken up by planes and gone into the hallway of my apartment to try to sleep. It's not comfortable, but it's the best way to sleep sometimes. No one should ever have to go through that."

While she finds the noise infuriating, much of her wrath is fueled by the FAA's lack of apology or admission that anything has changed.

"The biggest insult of all is the FAA saying nothing has changed," Carroll said. "I don't appreciate the attitude that 'you're by the airport, you should expect this noise.'"

Henry Young, a senior consultant in environmental planning and President of Young Environmental Services, took a look at the noise contour maps of Flushing for 2003, 2008 and Aug. 2012 to Feb. 2013. In a letter to Carroll, he wrote “Sadly, they paint a clear picture which is just as you have described it.”

### *Measuring the volume*

The Port Authority and FAA measure noise in DNLs, or the average decibel level for a 24 hour period. The agencies consider the 65 DNL contour to be the point where noise is severe enough to warrant soundproofing and mitigation.

In 2008, when the planes flew the traditional route over FMCP, Carroll’s building was at 55 DNLs. During the months from August 2012 to February 2013, her location was at 64.3 DNL, just shy of the 65 DNL contour. The contour does extend into the northwest corner of Flushing however, where many people live, and barely grazes the corner of FMCP.

“A change of that magnitude is quite striking,” Young said, explaining that the noise impact has tripled relative to what it was a few years ago. “This is consistent with Susan’s story. The numbers do bear out her concerns.”

“That change would not occur if there was no change in flight track over the residential area of Flushing,” Young said.

George Jehn, a pilot for Eastern Airlines and U.S. Airways based at LaGuardia for about 30 years, until he retired in 2005, as well as an elected official for the Airline Pilot’s Association Union said “I can probably count on one hand the number of times I flew over Downtown Flushing.”

“When we were flying off of runway 13, we would make a 175 degree turn over Flushing Meadows rather than over the populated area,” Jehn said.

He said the only reason he could come up with to delay making the turn, as the planes are now doing — all planes have to turn at some point — would be for “airmanship.” Now many planes use autopilot, while pilots used to hand fly the routes.

For landings, pilots flew in over the expressway, west of where people live.

“Obviously something’s changed,” he said. “Back then engines were noisier than they are on today’s aircrafts, but complaints were nonexistent.”

He called the current routes “totally unnecessary for safety or efficiency.” In fact, a longer final approach for landings means more fuel burned, Jehn said.

Last year, the Port Authority installed a portable noise monitor on the roof of Carroll’s building. Every day, she checks a website, called Webtrak, which shows the decibel readings the monitors collect in real time. “I just like it make sure it’s online and working.”

The numbers range from the high 70s to the mid-90s. Carroll’s said she’s seen readings as high as 96 decibels.

Young speculates that it takes hundreds of flights per day, “a sufficient volume of traffic, considering that aircraft are a lot quieter now,” to produce such a high DNL.

“There seems to have been a decision to promote air traffic in and out of LaGuardia,” Young said. “Promoting air traffic is not inherently evil, there is no bad guy here, but it has resulted in severe burdens to people in Flushing. Now it’s at a level where it really is quite objectionable.”

Young pointed out that while some new construction is soundproofed, it’s impossible to soundproof the outdoors. That means that in order to escape the worst of the noise people would have to live inside, in sealed environments. New York City building codes require operating windows.

The Port Authority is in the process of conducting a noise study in compliance with federal regulations, known as a Part 150 Study. The study is projected to take several years. When it is complete, some homes may be eligible for soundproofing, and other noise mitigation strategies, such as rezoning may be examined.

Almost all other countries around the world consider 55 DNL to be significant. A study released by the Harvard School of Public Health along with the Boston University School of Public Health found that people, especially older people, who live around airports are more at risk for heart disease and other cardiovascular issues.

“We’re clearly in a red zone here,” Young said.

He noted that some people, particularly those who leave the area for work during the day are not that adversely affected, while others are “simply devastated,” particularly children and seniors.

Young added that jet fuel leaves many small, invisible microparticles in the air that lodge in people’s lungs. When they build up in young children, microparticles can cause respiratory illnesses. Some of the particles are covered with carcinogens, but Young said there have not been sufficient studies about cancer rates near airports.

“This neighborhood has been so abused,” Carroll said. “I’m sick of hearing that the airports are the economic engines of the city when the planes are making it an impossible place to live. I fail to see the connection.”

### *An accidental expert*

Carroll jokes that she’s become an “accidental aviation geek,” as she frequently writes letters to the Port Authority, FAA and elected officials at all levels of government. Her efforts became an all-consuming passion that has forced her to learn the ins and outs of the airspace and flight procedures.

“I’m using technical terminology that I never thought I’d have to know,” Carroll said. “If I’m going to communicate with the Port Authority and the FAA I have to speak their language.”

Every morning and throughout the day, Carroll checks an app on her phone to see which way the wind is blowing so that she knows which flight procedures will be in use and how much noise to expect.

“Everything scares me now, with all of the tall buildings and the sheer population density,” Carroll said. “So many people are moving here and there are so many children and senior citizens.”

“People aren’t aware of the harmful effects of so much noise,” Carroll said. “Some people see it as just a nuisance or annoyance, but it’s so much more than that.”

Carroll also worries about her parents and the many senior citizens living in her building. “They should not have to put up with this. My father just turned 80.”

Robert Salant heads community relations for Flushing House, a nonprofit retirement home in Flushing. The 12-story building, which is home to about 300 senior citizens, is situated on one of the highest elevations in Flushing, on Bowne Street between 38th Street and Roosevelt Avenue. It’s L-shaped construction also makes it an echo chamber so loud noises are magnified.

Salant says that while residents seem satisfied with their overall care and quality of life, one of the few complaints they have is the jet noise from descending planes. The residents on the upper floors are especially unhappy with the constant din.

Many seniors can hear very well, even into their 90s, and many have hearing aides, according to Salant.

Salant has been the Flushing House director of community relations since 1999 and the problem has only gotten worse since then.

Several people including Carroll, say there should be more air quality testing.

“The biggest insult of all is the FAA saying nothing has changed,” Carroll said. “I don’t appreciate the attitude that ‘You’re by the airport, you should expect this noise.’ ... It makes me so angry to see this done to this historic, thriving community.”

Flushing is over 400 years old. When John Bowne built his house in 1661, it was surrounded by farmland. He was arrested by Peter Stuyvesant for allowing Quakers to worship hundreds of years before the Wright brothers flew the first planes at Kitty Hawk in 1903 and LaGuardia Airport opened in 1939.

### *Trouble at the Bowne House*

Now the structure, the oldest house in Queens, vibrates when jets fly overhead and the windows are coated in soot and particulate matter, according to Rosemary Vietor, vice president of the Bowne House Historical Society. This was not the case a few years ago.

Vietor often has trouble giving tours of the house because a lot of the information pertains to the gardens and the exterior. For example, before entering the house, she likes to show visitors that the house is situated facing south for heat and sunlight.

Now she often has to cut the talk short and move inside the house, where she can still hear the planes. Last June, the members tried to have their annual meeting outside, but the barrage of air planes made it too difficult.

“All landmarks are affected by this,” Vietor said. “It limits visitors’ experiences if they’re constantly being interrupted. There’s traffic noise down on the street anyway and this adds to it.”

Maureen Regan, a trained horticultural therapist at the Queens Botanical Garden has similar complaints. The frequent flights disrupt her instruction time. Every time a plane comes she raises her hand as a signal and stops speaking and waits until the plane passes.

“At LaGuardia, they tried to make it work in the past and there’s just no effort now,” Carroll said. “How many planes can you squish into this overly congested airspace?”

“It’s a joke,” Woo said. “We really have to think about the long-term plan. Our country has the most awkward infrastructure. How can the leading western country not realize that people are suffering?” She noted that Japan, Hong Kong and Taiwan all built their airports offshore, far away from population centers.

Carroll commends the efforts of Meng and other officials who have gone to the Port Authority and the FAA on behalf of their constituents, but thinks there would be a lot more progress if officials at all levels of government were working together.

“I don’t see the city council and the mayor stepping up,” Carroll said. “They’re not getting hearings at City Hall and bringing in experts. They’re just saying take it up with your state and federal officials. It’s deflating because the city owns the land the airport is on. There are things they can do.”

Carroll said she’s jealous of the people in Phoenix, where the elected officials are threatening to sue the FAA because of the noise impacts.

“Queens has 2.2 million people. We’re all exposed to this and we need to be protected. I hope in the future that happens. People all over feel let down.” Carroll said.

### *The airport roundtable*

As for the newly established airport roundtable, a forum for citizens to discuss their concerns directly with airport officials, Carroll said she’ll wait and see where it goes, but she believes that Downtown Flushing was short-changed. None of Downtown Flushing’s city or state level elected officials were selected to sit on the roundtable.

“Someone from Downtown Flushing should be on there,” Carroll said. “Some areas are geographically closer, but the runways point at Flushing.”

Warren Schreiber, a vice chairman and the aviation chairman for Community Board 7, was elected to serve as vice chairman on the roundtable coordinating committee.

Schreiber noted that with more than 250,000 people, including all of Downtown Flushing, the CB 7 area has one of the largest populations of any community district, so people have always been concerned about representation.

He said that he respects the state Senate and Assembly and City Council’s decisions and thinks that they picked well. “Maybe down the line other will approach us,” Schreiber said, as the roundtable can be amended by the current members to include more people.

Schreiber said the five coordinating committee members have been talking and are setting up their first meetings to establish the bylaws and funding to present to the roundtable at large.

“I’m really optimistic that this is going to get off the ground successfully,” Schreiber said. “There are really good people on that coordinating committee.”

He said that no topic should be off limits to the roundtable, including ground operations and that the body should operate in “an atmosphere of transparency.”

Carroll frequently vents her frustrations on social media, where people from other affected communities often commiserate. On Tuesday night she wrote “Thank you LGA, for depriving everyone in NE Queens of sleep last night. I’m sure TNNIS was absolutely necessary till past 2 am & you had no other alternatives.”

When Carroll flew down to Florida a few weeks ago, she wore a T-shirt with the slogan “#SaveTheWhitestoneClimb.” The pilot laughed and flew it.

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