

FAA doesn't provide help to 'Hell Chopper' issue

Jack Simpson, TheDestinLog.com (NW Florida) | DEC 8, 2017

Last week's column announced another City Hall meeting to hear public comments about the loud and dangerously low-flying sightseeing helicopters that constantly interrupted the quiet enjoyment that we so looked forward to all summer. This, the second meeting, was held on Tuesday, Dec. 5. This column is to report on what did and what did not happen at that meeting.

As expected, attendance was lower because of the holiday season and the weather, but mostly because chopper numbers are now down along with tourist numbers. However, the public's concern is anything but down. People are angry. Residents are still upset by what they call "deliberate disregard" by those responsible for these "Hell Chopper" interruptions in our lives.

While we are thankful for the FAA speakers who hosted the meeting, we were disappointed in the outcome. The first hour of the meeting was consumed by several FAA speakers showing maps and other slides about the FAA bureaucracy. One FAA speaker showed us slides of his luxury high-rise condominium in Panama City Beach with all his luxurious amenities. That is not what the attendees wanted to see and hear.

After an hour of this, attendees were allowed to express their concerns. And there were many. Most everyone complained that the sightseeing helicopters were flying dangerously low and making way too much noise so close to our homes and our beaches. Attendees included County Commissioner Kelly Windes, Destin Mayor Scott Fischer, several prominent Destin business owners, some HOA managers and yours truly. Everyone who spoke was resentful of the inconsideration shown by the chopper operators. It was one of the rare times that the current mayor and I agreed on something.

To make matters worse, the meeting was not well-organized. There was no microphone for those speaking from the audience and we missed much of what they had to say. One major sticking point is that the FAA requires all complaints to be almost impossibly documented with helicopter tail numbers, colors, altitude and distance in feet from persons, parasails, buildings, banner tow aircraft or any other objects. In one case involving over 200 complaints, only one was considered valid.

In other words, the FAA wants us to do much of their job for them. I pointed out that other agencies such as the state patrol, sheriff's office, Coast Guard and marine patrol have their own law enforcement out in the field writing citations, making arrests, and keeping us safe. They don't depend on us to report anything for them; they do it on their own. After another hour of hearing angry comments, the meeting started to break up. When I left, there were only a few stragglers milling around with the FAA speakers. There was much talk, but not much action.

This may be the most boring column I've ever written. But that's what happens when reporting on such a non-event. My next column promises to be better. Look for it next Saturday in The Destin Log.

Jack Simpson has owned and managed rental properties in Destin since 1974 and has lived in the city since 1983. His column is designed to start conversations in the community. To respond to Jack's column in The Log, email your letter to the editor or guest column to dricketts@thedestinlog.com. To contact Jack directly, email jacksimpson@cox.net.

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