

FAA: City Must Run SMO Without Unjust Discrimination

Matt Thurber, AINonline | August 30, 2016



A recent court decision requires Santa Monica to keep its airport open until 2023, and the FAA is reminding the city that it must treat pilots and tenants fairly. Photo: Matt Thurber

The FAA has reacted to the city of Santa Monica’s plan to close Santa Monica Airport (SMO) in 2018 and in the interim replace the airport’s two FBOs with city-run services. In a letter sent to Mayor Tony Vazquez yesterday, FAA director of airport compliance and management analysis Kevin Willis reminded the mayor that under a recent Part 16 decision, which the city may appeal, “the city is required to continue to operate the airport for public use on reasonable terms and without unjust discrimination.”

At a city council meeting last week, members voted unanimously on a resolution calling for closing the airport by July 1, 2018, replacing the airport’s two FBOs—Atlantic Aviation and American Flyers—with city-run services and other moves that appear to be designed to discourage pilots from operating at SMO. These include applying to the FAA to remove 2,000 feet from the existing 4,973-foot runway, rigorously enforcing the noise ordinance, changing hangar leases to permits, eliminating leaded fuel sales and enhancing airport security. In a recent move, the city has asked tiedown tenants to sign a new lease that now includes a 24-hour cancellation clause. Airport tenants have been limited to 30-day leases.

In the letter, Willis wrote: “We understand that the city council has firm views regarding its rights in this matter. However, we strongly urge the city council to abide by its federal grant assurance obligations and to forbear from taking actions in furtherance of its announced intent to close SMO pending further rulings by the federal courts. The FAA is prepared to pursue all legal remedies at its disposal if the city council takes concrete actions to restrict leases or operations

without complying with applicable federal law or otherwise seeks to undermine the Final Agency Decision [the recent Part 16 decision].”

Willis then asked the mayor to submit the city’s plan for taking over FBO services and the current leasing policy “for review.”

In a statement following last week’s city council meeting, the FAA wrote: “On August 15, 2016, the FAA issued its Final Agency Decision on a formal complaint about Santa Monica Airport. The agency decision determined the city of Santa Monica remains obligated to operate the airport until at least 2023. The FAA expects the city to comply with its federal obligations to operate the airport and to provide access to aeronautical users. The FAA will continue to work with the city to ensure the airport remains available to those users.”

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