[KSMO]: Grossly Incompatible with the Community Around It

It has been a busy Fall at the Santa Monica Airport [KSMO], where FAA is flexing its administrative-legal muscles, intervening to delay city efforts to evict two private operators. The City wants to take over fuel sales and other airport services (known as 'FBO services'), but the private FBOs do not want to accept that their leases are expired, nor do they want to give up lucrative profits. Just like FAA does not want to adhere to the agreement they struck with the city, in 1984, which meant the city could outright close the airport in July 2015.

In a recent email, Nelson Hernandez, the Senior Advisor to the Santa Monica City Manager, offered yet another update on the city's progress. He noted that, "...on August 23, Council directed the City Manager to establish a city-owned FBO by December 31, or as soon as practicable..." He then added, there is ample precedent for airport authorities (in this case, the City of Santa Monica) setting up their own FBO services at an airport, instead of letting an out-of-state operator reap the hefty profits. He noted three airports: "...in the last two years, Fort Wayne, Greenville, and Chattanooga, created their own City FBO for similar financial reasons...." He was referring to airports in Fort Wayne, IN [KFWA], Greenville, NC [KPGV], and Knoxville, TN [KDKX].

Out of curiosity, I did some online research and confirmed that, yes, all three of these airports have city-operated FBOs. And, all three appear to be very healthy airports. Nelson's list of three airports included one with an FAA control tower [KFWA] and two with no control tower [KPGV] and [KDKX]). Here's the data on these three airports, with [KSMO] added for comparison:

- **KFWA**: 70 based aircraft, a 12,000ft runway and an 8,000ft runway. FAA data shows the airport had 36,100 landings and takeoffs in 2015, down 71% from its peak year (124,000 ops in 2000). [3,400 acres, surrounded by farmland]
- **KPGV**: 71 based aircraft, a 7,200ft runway, and a 5,000ft runway. Form 5010 shows 48,200 annual operations in the year ending 5/30/2016 (this is a rough estimate, as there is no tower). [872 acres, surrounded by forest, farmland and limited residential development]
- **KDKX**: 167 based aircraft, and a single, 3,500ft runway. Form 5010 shows 68,400 annual operations in the year ending 4/30/2013 (this is a rough estimate, as there is no tower). [200 acres, surrounded by a river, a large quarry, and farmland]
- **KSMO**: 249 based aircraft, and a single 5,000ft runway. FAA data shows the airport had 90,200 annual operations in 2015, down 62% from its peak year (234,800 ops in 1991). [215 acres, surrounded by dense residential neighborhoods; and, within the airport, substantial footage is presently subleased to non-aviation business uses, generating profits for the FBOs.]

I noticed something else, too, which was a bit startling. You'll see it starkly presented in the three image-pairs below. When you look at how Santa Monica's runway is shoe-horned into the neighborhoods, and when you compare it to the 'airport normality' of these other three, far less crowded airport locations, it just jumps out at you. And, when you look at the series
of images showing how many houses were removed in recent years for a runway expansion at a very slow Greenville airport, you just have to wonder how in the world people can coexist with business jets so close to their Santa Monica homes. I mean, if FAA moves people out of their homes in Greenville, what is it about Santa Monica homeowners that makes them less at risk than North Carolinians? And given that there are so many Santa Monica homes, would it not make the most sense to simply close the airport??

Clearly, each of these three airports is far more compatibly located than is the Santa Monica Airport. In fact, looking at these three, I just have to say: if I was the new FAA Administrator, I'd be quick to ask my new highly-paid subordinates:

“Why are we NOT working with the city to expedite closing this airport? After all, it is grossly incompatible with the community (look at all those houses, and so close to the runway!), it is clearly a health hazard, and we have plenty of other LA Basin airports and longer, safer runways to serve the business jets and general aviation, all of which are far below their historic high traffic levels. So, when are we going to start serving everyone, not just our buddies who employ us after we retire?”
Are some airports more compatibly located than others?

How many people are impacted by each airport?
KPGV (l) vs KSMO (r)

NOTE: the Greenville east-west runway is the same length as the Santa Monica runway
KFWA

12,000ft runway

...Same scale...

KSMO

5,000ft runway
Here is another in a long series of emails sent out by Nelson Hernandez, to keep people informed on the progress. For the record, I think that Nelson has been doing an exceptionally good job, staying on track, not getting detoured by all of FAA's delay tactics, and just doing what is so critical to functioning representative governance: sharing real information in a timely manner. This email is a good example: concise, factual, timely. The people in Santa Monica, who have endured this airport mess for so many decades now, with nothing but obstructionism by FAA, they are lucky to have someone like Nelson working for them.

Click on the image below for a scrollable view; the PDF file may be downloaded.
All,

Atlantic Aviation and the City of Santa Monica, all agreed to continue the hearing originally scheduled for today until January 3rd. The purpose of the hearing was to give the judge the opportunity to determine whether to issue a preliminary injunction against the City. The preliminary injunction would have stopped the City from proceeding with its eviction actions against American Flyers and Atlantic Aviation. No preliminary injunction was issued and the case will be continued until January 3rd. American Flyers and Atlantic Aviation, two private Fixed Based Operators (FBOs) at the Airport, provide aeronautical services at Santa Monica Airport.

As I explained in previous emails, the City is in the process of exercising its federal rights and create our own City FBO. An FBO provides aeronautical services, such as towing of planes, fueling, hangar space, etc. Atlantic Aviation and American Flyers are the private FBOs at our airport and each are collecting a great deal of revenue for providing FBO services and subleasing city property. These profits should benefit the city, not a multi-national mega-corporation and an out-of-state corporation. They are using our land, our buildings, our hangars, and our fuel tanks to profit. For this reason, our Council decided to take action. On August 23, Council directed the City Manager to establish a city-owned FBO by December 31, or as soon as practicable. The revenue generated by a city-owned FBO can help to repay the $10M+ debt the Airport Fund owes the City. In the last two years, Fort Wayne, Greenville and Chattanooga created their own City FBO for similar financial reasons.

Sincerely,

Nelson Hernandez
Senior Advisor to the City Manager

An Update from Nelson Hernandez. Copy received in a 12/1/2016 email.  
(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add analysis & clarification)

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1 aiREFORM footnote: KFWA: the 'Fort Wayne International Airport', in Indiana, airport believed to have been activated in 1943. Has an FAA control tower; has a 12,000ft long and runway and an 8,000ft long runway. Form 5010 shows 70 based aircraft. FAA data shows the airport had 36,100 landings and takeoffs in 2015, down 71% from its peak year (124,000 ops in 2000).

2 aiREFORM footnote: KPGV: the 'Pitt-Greenville Airport' in North Carolina, airport believed to have been activated in 1941. Has a 7,200ft runway and a 5,000ft runway. Form 5010 shows 71 based aircraft, and 48,200 annual operations in the year ending 5/30/2016 (this is a rough estimate, as there is no tower).

3 aiREFORM footnote: KDKX: the 'Knoxville Downtown Island Airport, on an island near the city center; airport believed to have been activated in 1938. Has a single runway, 3,500ft long. Form 5010 shows 167 based aircraft, and 68,400 annual operations in the year ending 4/30/2013 (this is a rough estimate, as there is no tower).
The 7-page scrollable PDF file below contains images copied from the KPGV satellite view, at VFRmap.com. It illustrates the history of home demolition, road closure/relocation, and tree removal, precipitated by federally funded airport projects, at what is in fact an extremely slow and inconsequential airport.

*Click on the image below for a scrollable view; the PDF file may be downloaded.*
KPGV: Some Online Research About Pitt-Greenville Airport

There is a wealth of insight to be gained, doing online research on airports. In this report, an analysis is offered of the Pitt-Greenville Airport [KPGV], looking at the following:

- where is the airport?
- what other options do locals have for schedule air travel?
- how has airport expansion impacted local homes and roads?
- what is the significance of these airport-caused land-use changes?

Where is the Pitt-Greenville airport?

In the center of eastern North Carolina (see the red diamond below). Other airports marked with red circles are KCLT, KRDU, KISO and KEWN. Charlotte [KCLT] is the only destination served by the 4-5 daily commercial passenger flights out of KPGV.

What other options do people have in this region?

Mapquest shows that the airport in Raleigh-Durham [KRDU] is a 96-minute drive to the west of KPGV, via US Highways 258 & 264, and via Interstate 540. Mapquest also shows that the airport in New Bern [KEWN] is a 73-minute drive to the southeast of KPGV, via 52-miles of highways.¹ Both KRDU and KEWN offer superior options for commercial passenger air service. KRDU was a major hub for American Airlines until a corporate decision to close the hub in 1995. Numerous other airlines came in and the airport today offers direct flights to nearly fifty destinations. KEWN offers the same 4 daily flights to Charlotte, and an additional single daily flight to Atlanta, too.

¹ The drive is even shorter (52-minutes, 35-miles) to the airport in Kinston [KISO], where enormous federal investments have been made. This airport has a contract control tower, an 11,500ft runway, and a passenger terminal, but no scheduled passenger service.
How has airport expansion impacted local homes and roads?

To begin to answer this question, here's a satellite view of the airport vicinity:

The airport is north of the downtown area, across extensive undeveloped areas along the Tar River. The closest residential neighborhood is to the northeast, and additional residential development exists to the north, across highway 33.

Here's a closer look at the runways →

Based on the runway markings, commercial flights appear to primarily use the darker NE-SW runway (Runway 8-26), between the two yellow marks. The airport's longest runway is oriented N-S (Runway 2/20, 7,200ft). Note the pink box at the north end of Runway 2/20; this delineates an area where the runway has been recently extended (contrast the dark asphalt with the older, light-colored concrete).
Taking a closer look at the satellite views at VFRmaps.com, it was noticed that scaling up and down shows images from both before and after the runway extension. These show multiple areas where trees and homes were removed, to accommodate the runway extension.

In the image to the right, an aerial view that pre-dates the latest runway extension, marks have been added to show the locations of tree removals (light green) and house removals (red).

A series of closeup aerial pictures follows. A total of eight home demolitions are indicated by a heavy red mark.
Before and After images for tree removals, north of Belvoir Highway.

The northernmost house removal (trees were also removed).
Tree removal and four home demolitions to the east of the latest runway extension.

Three additional home demolitions to the east of the latest runway extension.
It is not just home demolitions that impact the community, but also how easily and efficiently people get around. Airports alter road systems. This impact on the community goes back many decades.

Take a closer look at the roads. Historically, a key route appears to have been the Belvoir Highway, trending NW to SE. Here are images showing a series of realignments to accommodate the airport, as well as later runway extensions to the north.

The original highway (NC 33), dating back to the old farm road that existed BEFORE the airport, would have followed the yellow line.

The first highway relocation curved to the north, onto new roads marked today as Redmond Lane and W Belvoir Road (pink lines added here).

This older image (pre-dating the latest runway extension) shows the two cul-de-sacs and evidence of the old Belvoir Road lineation. This road closure would have been for an earlier runway extension to the north.

In the second road relocation (for the first runway extension), Belvoir Highway was routed much further north.
Further evidence of the road relocation history: a vestige ‘Belvoir Highway’ name on a short section of Belvoir Road, in a commercial/industrial area to the east of the airport.

So, what is the significance of these land-use changes, caused by the airport?

Simply this: airport development may involve bringing in federal funds and creating temporary construction jobs, and this may reward a favored contractor and prop up a local economy for a short while, but there are adverse consequences. Airports are problematic to residential neighborhoods and road systems. Airport expansion has costs, including the displacement of neighborhoods, the reduction of quality of life for those remain in the modified (and often treeless) neighborhoods, and a substantial amount of vehicular inefficiency due to closed roads and relocated roads.

In this particular example, it is all the more galling that there was no evident benefit to be gained by repeatedly extending the north-south runway. It impacted people, but it also wasted federal funds that would have been more appropriately spent elsewhere.