

Closure date set for Santa Monica Airport

Matthew Hall, Santa Monica Daily Press | JAN 28, 2017



The City of Santa Monica has negotiated the authority to close the Santa Monica Airport on Dec. 31, 2028.

At a special meeting on Jan. 28, the council announced a deal with the Federal Aviation Administration and the United States government that dissolves all pending legal disputes between the agencies and sets a date for closing the facility.

Under the terms of the agreement, the airport can close on Dec. 31, 2028, the runway will be immediately reduced to 3,500 feet and both sides agree to adhere to the terms without interfering with each other's rights.

City Hall will regain control over the reclaimed runway land within six months according to City Manager Rick Cole. That land can be used as the city desires with an exception for an airport right of way that would prohibit uses for the former runway land that would interfere with airport traffic.

“This agreement ensures local control, as part of that as part of the future planning many things are on the table,” said Interim City Attorney Joseph Lawrence.

Staff said shortening the runway will reduce current jet traffic by about 40 percent and the shorter runway will eliminate the possibility of charter flights into or out of the airport.

The agreement also allows the city to pursue its municipal takeover of airport services and allows for Santa Monica Airport to develop a pilot program for the sale of unleaded fuel.

City Hall had previously voted to pursue closure of the airport by 2018, however it's efforts resulted in multiple legal disputes with the FAA and airport users. A prior court ruling had said the airport could close no earlier than 2023 and multiple complaints have been filed with the FAA over the city's actions at the airport.

The new deal dissolves all pending concerns and establishes a new framework for addressing future complaints.

While both sides agree to various provisions, Lawrence said future disputes could well arise. In those cases, the agreement puts those disputes in the jurisdiction of the district court, not the FAA.

Council voted to approve the settlement on a 4-3 vote. Kevin McKeown, Tony Vazquez and Sue Himmelrich voted against the settlement. Ted Winterer, Gleam Davis, Terry O'Day and Pam O'Connor voted to approve it.

The "No" votes all acknowledged the settlement has some benefits but consistently said the 12-year wait was too long.

"This consent decree means that planes, including some jets, will continue to fly for 12 more years. The mandate Santa Monica voters sent the Council with Measure LC is deferred for 12 more years. Airport Park is delayed for 12 more years. I vote no for all those reasons," said McKeown.

McKeown said the city missed an opportunity to press its advantage.

"With this settlement, we snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. This, at a time when the FAA's willingness to negotiate revealed that the FAA itself suspected they would lose their court battles with Santa Monica — even while they continue to hold our land hostage," he said.

Vazquez said he felt the city had the upper hand in negotiations and could have pressed for an earlier closing date.

"The clincher was I feel that while there's no guarantee in these decisions before a judge, I thought we had a strong enough case that worse case is we would close this thing by 2023," he said.

He also said a lot can change in 12 years.

"I'd hate to see a future council cut a deal with the FAA to continue to operate this airport any longer than 12 years," he said.

Himmelrich said the agreement lacked certainty and was too generous in allowing continued jet operations.

"I further believe that having the burden of even a reduced number of jets over our neighborhoods and effecting our residents is something, and frankly West LA residents, is something that is unacceptable to me," she said.

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(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add analysis & clarification)