

**AIR TRAFFIC:** Airport has strong regulatory/legal protections

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and landings, and in particular the circling of a skydiving plane as it gains altitude to drop parachutists into a field along Camp Polk Road.

Several residents in the area have contacted the airport and/or the City of Sisters with noise complaints, and the Indian Ford Homeowners Association drafted a letter of concern over the issue. Homeowners met with airport manager David Campbell and City officials last week.

In a letter to the editor last week, Bruce Mason complained that, "It sounds like plane after plane is flying over Sisters, creating a dawn-to-dusk drone of noise."

The HOA letter from Indian Ford Ranch expressed concern about "the increase in planes flying low over our neighborhood and also circling for hours above Sisters, especially during weekends, and the airport's plan to add more hangar capacity and commercial operations."

Campbell acknowledges the concerns local residents have raised — and he is forthright about the airport's position: "The airport will continue to grow; it will continue to increase in flight numbers — and all that was approved through city processes years ago."

The airport was purchased by Benny and Julie Benson in 2011, after they moved their company, ENERGYneering Solutions, Inc., there. The citizens of Sisters voted to annex

the property into the City of Sisters, and in 2013, the runway was replaced with grant funding. The airport's master plan calls for up to 50 hangars, though Campbell told *The Nugget* he doesn't think that full build-out on the hangars is realistic in the immediate future.

Campbell said there are currently 31 planes based at the airport, with some 30-40 takeoffs and landings per week being an average for the summer months. In five years, he expects those takeoffs and landings to double to 60 to 80 per week.

In addition, Skydive Awesome is located at the airport, operating Thursday through Sunday. According to drop-zone manager Stephen Rosier, the modified Cessna 182 contracted for the operation carries four skydivers up to 13,000 feet above sea level (approximately 10,000 feet above the ground) for a jump. It takes about 20 minutes to climb in circles to jump altitude. The plane's engine is audible from the ground for about 10 minutes of that time.

A busy day entails about 10 trips (15 is the record set last Memorial Day); an average day is three or four.

Campbell and Rosier noted that, in order to mitigate the noise impact of the plane circling as it gains altitude, the pattern is shifted each trip. They acknowledged that, while shifting the flight pattern reduces the direct impact on any one particular route, it also increases the number of people who are affected by the noise.

Rosier notes that people often make assumptions that the airplane noise they hear is

from the skydiving plane.

"We've gotten complaints on days when we never even started the plane," he said.

Rosier said that the last jump of the day has to be on the ground a half-hour before sunset. At this time of year, that means that jumps can continue until after 8 p.m.

Rosier said he is not willing to restrict hours of operation, because the operation requires jumping when conditions allow for it.

"We kind of have to capitalize on when the weather's good, also," he said.

Rosier acknowledged that concerns have been raised about skydivers landing on the field just west of Camp Polk creating a potential traffic hazard. He said he and the airport management are working on creating a viewing area that will discourage people from parking along Camp Polk Road and pedestrians from using the roadway to take photographs.

Rosier estimated that Skydive Awesome is bringing more than 100 people into Sisters each month — people who eat in local restaurants and shop at local shops.

The airport's attempts at mitigation and its position on its prerogatives don't sit well with neighbors who feel the impacts.

John Mapes told *The Nugget*, "After our meeting with the airport manager and city manager, it occurred to me that the owners and management of the airport view



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

Increased use of Sisters Eagle Airport is impacting neighbors.

Sisters as an airport with a zone around it that serves the airport, rather than a community with an airport that serves the community."

Campbell said the airport is "willing to listen to reasonable ideas" to mitigate impacts, but he made it plain that those mitigation ideas couldn't materially impact the businesses' ability to operate.

In some cases, obvious ideas for mitigation aren't available. For example, Skydive Awesome is required to operate in a five-mile "cylinder" around the airport and so cannot circle and drop skydivers away from Sisters, even if that was a viable option from a business standpoint.

Some local residents have expressed concern that the airport may add a helicopter touring company to the commercial operations out of the facility. Campbell said that there are no plans for that as of now.

"I'm not seeking it," he said. "If somebody showed up and said, 'I want to do

tours'... we'd take a look at it."

Those with complaints about increased traffic and noise essentially have no regulatory or legal recourse: Neither the FAA (Federal Aviation Administration) nor the City of Sisters can compel changes in how the airport operates as long as it is within the parameters of the law and approved land-use. In fact, the protections of airports and airport activities under Oregon law are quite robust.

That leaves it up to the airport and its neighbors to find ways to co-exist — and the competing values of economic activity and the tranquility of neighbors may not be resolvable.

"If people would rather not have growth in the Sisters area, they have a legitimate complaint," Campbell said. "If they want to see growth like there has been in the Central Oregon area in general, then, yes, they're going to have to learn to live with it."

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