

Low flight hearings scheduled

The Public Hearing on the Low Flight Proposal is scheduled for Sept. 2 in the Lincoln Auditorium at the University of Maine Farmington from 6 to 10 p.m. The public is encouraged to attend.

By David Hart
Irregular Staff

WESTERN MOUNTAINS — The public hearing on the Air National Guard's proposal to lower the flight floor from 7,000 ft. to 500 ft. is now before us.

The Air National Guard located at Barnes Air Force Base (Westfield, Mass.) has completed a Draft Environmental Impact Study. A Public Hearing is scheduled for Sept. 2. The Lincoln Auditorium at the University of Maine, Farmington and an adjoining room has been reserved for the hearing from 6 to 10 p.m.

Residents at that time will have an opportunity to voice their concerns or support for this proposal. This may be the only opportunity for the people of Maine before the EIS is presented to the Federal Aviation Administration for ap-

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proval.

In the early 90s a similar draft EIS was presented to Mainers and through strong opposition and concerns by both local residents and state agencies, the proposal was withdrawn.

Two years ago, the ANG presented a Draft Environmental Assessment. The Governor, state delegation in Washington D.C., the Maine Department of Transportation and others demonstrated serious concern with the proposal and asked for a more detailed EIS to be conducted as well as to see if the ANG has sought viable alternatives.

"I understand the need and importance of providing appropriate training capacity for our Air National Guard, though I ask that the concerns of the State of Maine and its citizens be considered," said U.S. Senator Susan Collins (R-Maine).

David Farmer, chief of staff for Governor Baldacci said that he thinks there is no question whatsoever that there will be an impact as a result of lowering the flight floor. It's something that we're concerned about and we need to make sure that the public is able to scrutinize this proposal to its full potential, he said.

Many local citizens are ready to support or oppose this proposal on Sept. 2, but some are questioning whether the state is involved enough and when and whether it will take a position one way or the other.

"I am concerned that the state is not involved enough," said Nancy O'Toole of Phillips. "We do need representation, support and technical advice at the state level," she added.

O'Toole, an active member of Western Maine Matters, holds a bachelors degree in environmental engineering and said she has serious concern about the proposal.

"My concerns are the noise impacts on wildlife and domestic animals, air pollution caused by low level flights, safety impacts on the seven civilian airports in the pathways of Condor 1 and 2 and the overall socio-economic impacts to the residents and tourism in the area," O'Toole explained. She also said the flares and chaffs used in low level training is also a major concern.

MDOT's chief planner Kate Fuller confirmed that her office is the lead agent from the state, but said that her office has no one with the technical experience to do an

in-depth review of the proposal.

"We're not looking at it in an in-depth review; we're making sure they've responded to the questions asked by the MDOT and they're following the procedure as requested by the governor," Fuller said.

"In terms of technical review, I'm not sure who is doing that at the state level. We're doing a surface level technical review, but not a full technical review," Fuller added.

"The governor is concerned and remains to be concerned," Farmer said. "They (ANG) have done what we asked and it's up to us to see if we agree with their findings."

Farmer said they are in review of the EIS to see if the questions asked by the MDOT are answered to their satisfaction.

"You have a balancing act here," Farmer explained. "You have to first see if there is an environmental impact; if and to what extent is the impact on people; if there's a need; and if this type of training can be conducted somewhere else with a lesser impact."

The Chief of Staff said that the governor is concerned with the notion of lowering the flight plane. "There is no question that there's an impact. We have to reach the best conclusion possible. We pushed for more stringent review because the governor is concerned about the impacts," Farmer said.

The Maine state government has no jurisdiction over this proposal, but the governor does have the right to create a policy to oppose the proposal with the FAA or support it, Farmer explained.

"The governor is not bound to a public hearing schedule and will file a letter with the FAA whenever he deems appropriate. But more than likely a decision would happen after the public weighs in."

"I have closely monitored this issue over the past decade and continue to have serious concerns regarding the comprehensive review that I requested in my letter to the Federal Aviation Administration last fall," said U.S. Senator Olympia J. Snowe (R-Maine). "We must judiciously balance the need to provide our brave men and women of the Armed Forces with the equipment and training necessary for them to protect the nation here and abroad with the need to safeguard the public interest and ensure that those Mainers living in the proposed CONDOR area are safe and free to conduct their business and

live without undue interference. The Environmental Impact Study requested by Maine's Department of Transportation has been released, and it is my understanding that the public comment period will conclude by the end of September," Snowe said. "I will continue to closely monitor this issue and work with my fellow representatives from Maine, the Governor and his staff, and the Air National Guard to ensure the greatest weight is given to the concerns of residents in the affected areas."

Representative Tom Saviello said he supports any proposal that would save a soldier's life and would do all he could to support that.

However, in a conversation last week his greatest concern among others was the safety of other civilian aircraft flying out of the six or seven airports affected by the proposal.

"To me, this is a federal issue and the people who voted for President Obama should send him a letter and ask for his help. They really need to let Washington know," Saviello said.

Kate Simmons, press secretary from the attorney general's office was contacted and she said this is not an issue that is something they can weigh in on and said that her office had no jurisdiction over the proposal.

State Senator Peter Mills (R-Cornville) did not form an opinion over the merits of the proposal but said that although local agencies do not have jurisdiction over the proposal, standards that already exist through the Maine Department of Environmental Protection on noise could be helpful. Although this is not considered a land use, the DEP has restrictions on what is allowable for noise within a development and has specific parameters of what's acceptable.

"The MDOT is the lead agency," Farmer said. "When it comes to a policy decision to oppose or support the proposal that's a decision that will be made by the governor."

For more information regarding this proposal, the MDOT is asking those interested to contact Major Stephen R. Lippert, ANG, at the following telephone: (301) 836-8167 or E-mail: stephen.lippert@ang.af.mil.

The EIS itself as well as other supporting documents are found on the MDOT's Web site as follows: <http://www.maine.gov/mdot/angcondor/index.htm> and can also be found at the Rumford, Rangeley, Monsoon, Bingham and Bremer Pond public libraries.