

Whidbey News-Times

Tensions rise over jet noise impacts on historic sites

By Jessie Stensland

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Wednesday night, state and local officials publicly and directly challenged Navy officials over plans to dramatically increase the number of training flights at a rural Central Whidbey airstrip by Navy warplanes known for being loud.

A total of 340 people crowded into the Coupeville High School performing arts center to listen and offer input during a public meeting held by the federal Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, or ACHP.

Because the Navy terminated negotiations with interested parties under Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, the independent agency is required to give the secretary of the Navy comments on the impact the Navy's plans will have on historic properties and landscapes, as well as any mitigation to offset the impacts.

The Navy's "preferred alternative" from the Environmental Impact Statement is to increase the number of EA-18G Growlers at Naval Air Station Whidbey Island by 36 and move most of the aircraft carrier landing practice to the Outlying Field Coupeville, for an annual total of 12,000 touch-and-go passes.

The majority of people in the crowd, a handful of local officials and more than 35 speakers articulated concerns about the Navy's plans to increase flights at the Outlying Field Coupeville.

While negotiations had revolved around funding to restore and preserve historic structures, most of the speakers said the only effective mitigation would be to decrease the number of Growler flights.

"Jets can be moved. Ebey's Landing cannot," said Michael Monson of the group Citizens of Ebey's Reserve. "Preserve the reserve."

On the other hand, three citizens defended the Navy and its mission of protecting the nation. Steve Bristow of the Oak Harbor Area Council of the Navy League said the primary goal of activists was to remove the Growlers and the Navy from Whidbey altogether.

Bristow also pointed out that the history of the Navy is intertwined with Central Whidbey since before Col. Isaac Ebey settled there in the mid-1800s.

In a press release, the Navy League claimed that a local activist group was over-represented in negotiations and never intended to reach common ground.

Capt. Matthew Arny, commanding officer of Naval Air Station Whidbey Island, spoke briefly, discussing the process of negotiating mitigation and the Navy's ongoing commitment to the community.

Allyson Brooks, the state's historic preservation officer, addressed Arny, contradicting his assertions about the Navy's good intentions and the history of negotiations.

Her comments raised a cheer from the audience.

Brooks pointed out that she worked successfully with other federal agencies — the U.S. Department of Transportation and the FAA — to reach agreements on large mitigation efforts for projects that affected historic areas.

“The same law that applies to all the other federal agencies should apply to the Navy,” she said.

Brooks said she and other interested parties felt that the “area of potential impact” the Navy identified was too small, as was the Navy’s offers.

“I’m telling you today, their proposed mitigation was not sufficient,” she said.

She questioned whether the Navy negotiated in good faith. She said Arny asked over and over again for statistics related to the impacts.

“The numbers we brought were never good enough,” she said. “It was severely frustrating.”

Brooks also asserted that Arny will no longer be commanding officer in two years and other federal officials would be back in Washington, D.C. the next day, but Central Whidbey residents will still be living there.

“The mitigation should be sufficient, just like it says in law,” she said.

Asserting that “Ebey’s Reserve does not have a price tag,” Island County Commissioner Helen Price Johnson spoke about how the “management of operations” could help mitigate the impact of Growler noise.

She said the negotiation process did more harm than good and further polarized the population.

Coupeville Mayor Molly Hughes discussed how residents value the area and worked to preserve the historic buildings, open landscape peace and quiet, and the dark skies. She said it was ironic that the Navy is now using those qualities to justify its actions.

Former Island County commissioner Angie Homola, an architect and wife of a Navy officer, said members of the Navy do not want to destroy that which they are protecting. She said the only recommendation that applies under the act is no expansion in flights.

Steve DeHaven was one of the residents who talked about the sheer volume of the Growler noise, saying that his rock band had to stop playing when they were flying.

He started a chant directed at the Navy: “You work for us.”

The ACHP has until Jan. 14 [2019] to submit comments to the secretary of the Navy on the impacts on historic properties and mitigation.

The secretary has yet to issue a final decision on the number of Growlers coming to NAS Whidbey and the distribution of training flights.