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Of White Lies *and* Unintended Consequences

Real Estate, General Aviation, and the Inevitable Conflict

I'll bet you've heard this one before:

"People around my airport are complaining about the noise?! The airport was there 60 years before their houses were even built, so they don't have any right to complain. Didn't they know they bought a house near an airport?"

You may have even uttered those words yourself. But the situation isn't nearly as simple as we'd like to make it sound in our self-righteous rhetoric. Life rarely is.

These circumstances will play out repeatedly every year. As our cities and suburbs expand, they are rapidly encroaching on airports. Those airports, once surrounded by cattle or industrial areas, now face far more discriminating neighbors. And when you add sales pressures and perhaps a few less-than-scrupulous real estate agents to the mix, you end up with a recipe for a conflict in which both sides feel morally superior. In many cases, people who bought these homes did so on the premise that "nobody really flies into that airport," or, "they're going to close that airport in the next couple of years." So imagine their surprise when the first nice spring flying day arrives and they feel as if they are being bombarded by the entire 8th Air Force.

So what do they do? They call local officials and complain. Then maybe they start looking at how they would go about closing that infernal nuisance. They sometimes cloak their arguments in safety, as in, "one of those little airplanes is going to fall out of the sky onto my house." While that is possible, it's extremely unlikely. For many, the core issue is noise.

So what do we do? The simplest strategy is to fall into the familiar "airport was here first" refrain and dig in for a long and exhausting fight. But to what end? All that accomplishes is to embitter both sides and possibly provoke an expensive legal battle whose outcome is far from certain.

The other option is to make the shared environment a happier one. There are two parts to this much more positive strategy.

Be a Better Neighbor

This is the part we can most directly control. There are a number of ways we, as pilots, can work to reduce the aircraft noise footprint over sensitive areas. Reducing the aircraft noise signature shows good faith to our neighbors and demonstrates that we are willing to try resolving conflict cooperatively, rather than through adversarial processes. Here are several simple steps to being a better neighbor.

First, follow any noise abatement procedures already in place at your airport or any other airport you visit. If a slight course deviation during departure or arrival can reduce your impact on the community, it is well worth the adjustment. If your airport doesn't have noise abatement procedures, ask the airport management to consider whether it

might be helpful to establish such protocols. Even slight lateral flight path adjustments can have notably positive impacts on noise sensitive neighbors. Bottom line: before you head out to the airport, check the remarks section of the airport/facility directory for noise abatement procedures, and make it a point to comply unless safety requires otherwise.

Second, think about your altitude. If part one of noise foot print reduction is making lateral adjustments (i.e., changing ground track), part two is attempting to make vertical adjustments. It is clear that aircraft generally create the greatest number of complaints during approach and departure, but since we have to take off and land, it may seem impossible to mitigate approach and departure noise. Though we can't eliminate it, we can reduce it by managing airspeed.

During your initial pilot training, you learned about "V-speeds" such as V_x (best angle of climb) and V_y (best rate of climb). Pilots typically use V_y as the preferred climb speed since it provides the best rate of climb. While it may sound as if V_y is the fastest way to gain altitude

and thus lessen noise impact, that's not the case. Remember that rate is distance (feet of altitude in this case) over time (minutes in this case). While flying at V_y enables the shortest time to a given altitude, it may actually increase both the magnitude and the duration of the noise footprint.

Now consider V_x . V_x enables the best angle of climb, which means it provides the greatest altitude gain over a given distance. Since the airport and its immediate surroundings can be considered insensitive to noise, why not use this area to maximum advantage? By thinking in terms of angle rather than rate of climb, we can increase the altitude gained before exiting airport property. That, in turn, means a lower noise signature on the ground because of the greater vertical separation from noise-sensitive neighbors.

Remember, however, that safety always comes first. While V_x will deliver the greatest climb rate for a given distance, it will likely take longer to reach a given altitude. Depending on the exact angle of the climb, forward visibility could be somewhat compromised. If you're in a tight pattern with an aircraft of dissimilar performance, a V_x climb might make it

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difficult to track the aircraft you're following. And, of course, be mindful that V_x reduces your margin above the 1-g stalling speed. If you haven't done much flying at best-angle-of-climb, consider hiring an instructor to practice until you are completely comfortable with your ability to maintain control of the aircraft.

Another noise-friendly tactic is to reduce power and/or prop speed when it is possible and safe to do so. This technique applies particularly to those with constant speed props. Even a modest reduction in RPM can make a significant difference to your neighbors. As with the previous technique, though, never compromise safety of flight. But if any one of these tactics, or some combination of them, is safe and practical, please consider using them for the greater good.

Win Hearts and Minds

The next part in the strategy is to build a community at the airport and reach out to your neighbors. Gather your fellow aviators and work to improve your airport's public image. Whether it's through targeted events like an airport open house, or more general events like a Young Eagles day, finding a reason to invite and involve the community with airport activities is a positive step.

Most people fear what they don't know or understand, and many people today have little (or no) experience with GA. Drawing neighbors to the airport, whether for a BBQ, a flight, or just to walk around (with proper safety precautions, of course), demystifies the GA environment. Your neighbors can connect a human being — one they know and like — to “those little airplanes,” and sometimes that is enough to change the heretofore hostile mindset. Airport users can also use such occasions to let the community know about noise reduction efforts, and to educate neighbors on what they can safely do to effect a more positive change. Showing courtesy, care, and concern goes a lot farther than callous disregard. And it works both ways. By listening to the airport neighbors, pilots can gain a better understanding of, and appreciation for, their concerns about noise, safety, and perhaps other issues.

And, of course, building a community at the airport and inviting its neighbors to participate exposes more people to the joys of personal aviation. So, consider how a neighborhood “charm offensive” might pay dividends not just with the current generation, but also with the generations to come. 

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Photo by James Williams