

TheBattleOverTeterboroFromRomancetoHostility.txt
The Battle Over Teterboro: From Romance to Hostility

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By GEORGE JAMES

TETERBORO--THE six-passenger plane was heading for Teterboro Airport when it crashed into an oak tree in Gil and Louise Bowman's backyard in Hasbrouck Heights and burst into flames.

Mrs. Bowman later told her husband she heard the explosion and saw an orange glow against the drawn blinds and thought her house was on fire. She grabbed her two children, 8-year-old Nicholas and 3-year-old Jessica, and fled through the front door into the chill December evening without stopping to put on her children's shoes.

"If that was a big plane that came down," Mr. Bowman says now, "given the damage a little plane can do, it could have wiped out half a block."

As it was, the plane that crashed in the Bowman's backyard on Dec. 9, 1999, a six-passenger Beechcraft Baron 58TC, killed the pilot and three passengers and injured three other people who made a futile rescue attempt. The pilot had ignored an air traffic controller's instructions and approached Teterboro from the wrong direction.

As fortunate as residents were - they all escaped injury - the memory still haunts residents of the towns surrounding Teterboro Airport, one of the busiest general aviation airports in the nation with more than 500 takeoffs and landings each day. Within about a four-mile radius of the bustling airport are about 23 of Bergen's 70 municipalities with an estimated combined population of about 300,000 people, more than a third of Bergen's 884,000 residents.

Nor was the crash in the Bowmans' backyard an isolated incident. On March 9, 2002, a propeller-driven Cessna 210 crashed in flames on the edge of Teterboro Airport shortly after take-off, stopping about a hundred yards from congested Route 46. The pilot was killed immediately. And on a Sunday evening in September 2002, a small Piper Saratoga bound for Canada took off from Teterboro, developed engine trouble and crashed 50 miles away into a new housing development in Byram. No one on the ground was injured but, but the pilot and his wife were killed and their two small children critically injured.

It is accidents like these that have neighbors of the 827-acre airport - which straddles the southern Bergen County boroughs of Teterboro, with about 50 residents, and Moonachie, with 2,754 - staunchly opposed to a proposal from the Federal Aviation Agency that would allow jets weighing more than 100,000 pounds to land at the suburban airport. Congress has passed a measure that may succeed in blocking such a maneuver, though the outcome is far from certain.

And in a meeting as recently as last Wednesday in Washington, Anthony R. Coscia, chairman of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, told the administrator of the aviation agency, Marion Blakey, that under no circumstances would his agency physically modify the airport to allow heavier planes to land. The F.A.A. proposal includes not only Teterboro, considered by the aviation industry as the No. 1 business airport on the East Coast, but about 3,000 airports nationwide, including about 16 others in New Jersey.

The danger of another plane crash has over the years added to the concerns and intruded on the quality of life in this pocket of suburbia - fears of pollution from jet fumes and the ear-splitting noise of planes landing and taking off at all hours.

Residents Are Fed Up

"It's a constant, 24 hours a day, seven days a week," said Brian Curreri, a 40-year-old training specialist for New Jersey Transit, as he stood outside his two-family house in Carlstadt one recent evening. "Sometimes when the cloud level is low, you can actually smell the fuel. We can't

TheBattleOverTeterboroFromRomancetoHostility.txt

watch TV; we can't sit in the backyard; we can't open windows in the house; we can't talk on the phone." As he spoke, he had to raise his voice to be heard over the high-pitched whine of jets taking off every three minutes just a mile and a half from his house.

Complicating matters is the adversarial relationship that has developed between the Port Authority, the operator of the airport, and surrounding communities. In the past, residents say, the agency had largely turned a deaf ear to complaints about the noise and pollution. So in January 2001, when the Port Authority announced plans for a \$92.4 million improvement of Teterboro, many residents viewed it as an expansion in disguise that would mean more planes, more noise, more pollution and more risk of jetliners falling from the sky.

The redevelopment effort - which has been going on while efforts to stop it have ground on in federal court - calls for construction of a new administration building, realignment of taxiways and the relocation of some office and hangar facilities to a 22-acre undeveloped site at the southern end.

Fighting the plan is a bipartisan alliance of elected officials from a dozen neighboring towns, called the Coalition for Public Health and Safety, which sued the Port Authority in Federal District Court in May 2002 to try to delay the plan until a thorough pollution study could be undertaken. After several court hearings over the last year, the two parties have been meeting to discuss a possible settlement.

For their part, Port Authority officials say they have tried to mend the frayed relations, and in recent months have come out strongly against allowing the heavier planes to land at Teterboro. In addition, the agency has also worked with Representative Steven R. Rothman, a Democrat from Bergen County, to shut down a regularly scheduled charter service that began last March.

Mr. Coscia, who took over as chairman of the Port Authority in May, said he was committed to maintaining Teterboro as part of the region's transportation infrastructure, but without "undermining the quality of life of the people who live around it."

"As a newcomer who not all that long ago observed things the way these individuals did and in some cases came to the same conclusion, I can't fault people who live near the airport over being concerned about it," Mr. Coscia, 43, lawyer, financial expert and former chairman of New Jersey Economic Development Authority, said in a telephone interview.

"These are problems that can't be solved overnight," Mr. Coscia added. "But I do think there is a new attempt at the Port Authority, one that I support very strenuously and Governor McGreevey supports, that requires the Port Authority to make the facility as comfortable with its operations to the community as possible."

Teterboro takes its name from Walter C. Teter, a New York investment banker, who bought hundreds of acres of swamp in the early 1900's with the notion of building a racetrack. The town of Teterboro was created by special legislation in 1917 by annexing sections of three towns. But when the state Racing Commission failed to approve the plan, Mr. Teter sold half of the property to an aircraft corporation, which built the facility. The Port Authority took control of the airport in 1949, and over the next six years acquired about 60 houses and farms in Moonachie and Hasbrouck Heights to expand it.

"This proved to be a hardship for some because with the money offered, they could not afford to buy housing in the surrounding area," Frank C. Derato wrote in "Down The Hill: Memories of a Lost Wood Ridge," (Cranbury Publication, 2002).

Over the years the suburban airport and its occasional prop-driven planes became a fixture in the shadow of Manhattan. But as it changed - from the early days of aviation when Anthony Fokker, the Dutch aircraft designer, set up shop and luminaries like Floyd Bennet and Amelia Earhart tested planes overhead - so, too, did feelings about the airport, from romantic curiosity to open hostility.

"As kids, we would bike from Rutherford to Teterboro, and we'd go into the

old control tower and watch Art Linkletter land his plane," said Carol Skiba, a legal secretary and member of the coalition. "It was cool. But not now."

To detractors, airport officials like to point out that Teterboro generates \$500 million a year for the region and employs about 1,200 people, 94 percent of whom live within 15 miles. Five aviation service companies, called fixed-base operations, maintain offices and hangars at the airport and provide refueling, maintenance and charter services. Each day, about 550 planes take off or land at Teterboro, which is known as a "reliever airport," to ease congestion at Newark Liberty, Kennedy and LaGuardia Airports - from Piper Cubs to Gulfstream jets carrying transplant organs to Hackensack Medical Center to hard-charging executives, sports teams and celebrities.

Longtime residents first insisted that the number of flights had increased sharply over the years, though a closer examination of records actually showed a fluctuation. In the late 1990's the number averaged about 180,000 a year but jumped to 200,599 in 2002, the highest number since 1986 when there were 218,922 flights. Faced with the figures, residents then said that while the overall number of flights might have decreased, the number of bigger planes with louder engines had increased.

"They say, 'We've only increased by a small percentage the number of flights,' but that's not quite truthful," said Assemblywoman Rose Marie Heck, a Republican from Lodi. "The number is correct but the type of aircraft has changed dramatically over the last 10 years. Instead of Piper Cubs, the jets came in."

For residents who have experienced planes skimming a rooftop, once is enough.

One such person is Nadine Thompson, a 43-year old resident of Wood Ridge who stepped outside to speak with her husband last Father's Day, only to have a plane that had aborted a landing pass over her house only about 200 feet from the ground. "It was pretty darn big," Ms. Thompson said. "It wasn't a little prop plane. They told me it was a 12- to 16-seater and when it's 200 feet above your head it's pretty darn big."

She called the airport and the Federal Aviation Administration, though she failed to reach anyone that day. Over the next few months she called a dozen more times, but she said she never got a full explanation of what happened or whether the pilot, who she was told had made an error, was ever disciplined.

'Convenience of the Few'

To some extent, she and others in this densely packed slice of North Jersey feel they are engaged in class warfare.

"I do not doubt they want bigger planes to land here because someone wants to be able to get on his big fancy plane and have an easy trip into New York City and not have to deal with security issues at airports like Newark," she said. "It's basically money talking, and it's the convenience of the few over the health and safety of the many."

William R. De Cota, director of aviation for the Port Authority, says the \$92.4 million capital plan is necessary because the infrastructure of the airport had fallen into disrepair during the 30 years it was operated by the two private contractors, Pan Am Airways and then Johnson Controls. By the time the contract with Johnson Controls expired in December 2000, the Port Authority said it had to rehabilitate the airport. Nearly half the expenditure, \$44.9 million, will go toward realigning taxiways, which officials say will speed planes in and out and as a result cut down on noise and pollution.

The plan also calls for paving 22 acres of unused land at the southern end of the airport so First Aviation, an airport tenant, can relocate offices and hangars there. The Port Authority will then use First Aviation's current site to build the administration building and housing for emergency fire and rescue equipment.

Yet despite what officials say, opponents insist these measures are aimed at lengthening and strengthening the two intersecting runways, which are 7,000 feet and 6,015 feet in the shape of an X. And even if that is not

the case, they insist, the intent is the same: to make way for more and larger planes.

The authority has adamantly denied that. "Not at all, not lengthen, not strengthen," Mr. DeCota said. Rather, he said, "a lot of what we're actually doing is an investment that in effect reduces the impact of the airport on the community."

To reach out to the community as well as oversee the improvements, Mr. DeCota said, the agency in February 2001 assigned Lanny Rider, a 25-year-Port Authority employee and former combat helicopter pilot in Vietnam, as on-site manager. "We asked Lanny to basically make sure the community's interest was well-represented," Mr. DeCota said.

One of Mr. Rider's roles is to serve as co-chairman of the Teterboro Aircraft Noise Abatement Advisory Committee, which has brought together, among others, officials from the Port Authority, the F.A.A. and the aviation industry to recommend noise abatement measures and to discuss other issues.

In an effort to ingratiate himself with the community, Mr. Rider also serves as president of the Teterboro Business League. He has held meetings to explain the plan, and has tried to burnish the agency's image through such outreach efforts as contributing \$50,000 to the \$335,000 cost of a new fire truck for Moonachie, undertaking a \$6 million drainage program that includes building a new pump house for the borough of Teterboro and improving ball fields just beyond the airport fence.

The agency says it has also taken steps to show residents that it hears their concerns. Last year, the Port Authority banned "Stage 1" aircraft, the oldest and loudest planes and biggest polluters, from using Teterboro, eliminating about 900 flights a year. And it supports legislation being sponsored by Representative Rothman for more stringent noise standards. Another Port Authority policy now says that planes will be banned from using Teterboro ever again if they exceed F.A.A. noise limits at the airport three times within two years.

In addition, the agency - barred by federal law from instituting a mandatory overnight curfew - has urged pilots to avoid using the airport between midnight and 6 a.m. unless the flight is essential. "Stage 2" aircraft, those described as still noisy but less so than Stage 1, have been asked not to operate between 10 p.m. and 7 a.m. Still, there are about 50 flights every night.

Paul F. Busch, the municipal manager of Teterboro, and Mayor Fred Dressel of Moonachie say that since Mr. Rider arrived, relations with the Port Authority have improved. "We feel we now have an individual and organization that's trying to cope with the problems," Mr. Busch said. "I think they are taking steps to make the airport less intrusive."

Neither Teterboro nor Moonachie joined the suit against the Port Authority. Mr. Dressel, who has been mayor of Moonachie for 19 years, said: "I have to be careful how I approach the Port Authority. They own 40 percent of our town, and I have to deal with them on a day-to-day basis, and the first thing that happens when there is a lawsuit is no one is allowed to talk to you but their legal department, and I can't operate that way."

The coalition filed its lawsuit in May 2002 because it questioned the thoroughness - and independence - of a pollution study that the Port Authority had commissioned the previous year. At the suggestion of Assemblywoman Heck, who had also been studying the pollution issue, the Port Authority hired the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute of Rutgers University to begin the first phase of a three-part study.

As for the coalition, it commissioned the Environ International Corporation of Groton, Conn., to assess the environmental impact, and in October 2001 it issued a report noting that such harmful chemicals as benzene and butadiene, components of jet fuel, greatly exceeded federal standards. But there was one flaw: the two-day study could not determine how much of the pollution came from the airport and how much came from the traffic on nearby Routes 17 and 46.

TheBattleOverTeterboroFromRomancetoHostility.txt

At that point, the coalition contended that it was up to the Port Authority to finance a more thorough study but insisted that it have a voice in choosing the company to conduct it.

Seeking an Accommodation

Two things have occurred that make it seem as if the coalition will prevail. At a meeting in October, Stuart Lieberman, a Princeton lawyer representing the coalition in the suit, said that settlement discussions with Port Authority lawyers had begun and despite "an adversarial relationship" in court hearings, things had progressed in the talks where "we are trying to amicably work out something."

And in September, Governor McGreevey flew into Teterboro and pledged that \$450,000 - half from the state and half from the Port Authority - would be made available for the thorough study of pollution that the coalition wanted, with monitoring stations to be set up around the airport.

Even then, Mayor Steven Lonegan of Bogota, co-chairman of the coalition, was less optimistic at the meeting. "I'm not willing to declare victory until we have the settlement in our hands," he said.

For Mr. Lonegan and others, the pollution study is a foot in the door - a way to keep planes heavier than 100,000 pounds from using Teterboro.

Currently, said Mr. DeCota, 98 percent of planes using the airport weigh less than 80,000 pounds.

Pushing in the other direction is the Boeing Company, which has been trying to get its 737 business jet into the airport since it was developed in late 1996. Last June the company filed a complaint with the F.A.A. saying the ban at Teterboro was unreasonable and discriminatory, and as a result the agency published a proposed policy change in the Federal Register last July.

The proposal requires airports to provide evidence that allowing heavier planes to use the airport will damage runways and notes that allowing occasional planes that exceed the weight limit will not diminish the life of a runway. It also requires airports that develop new runways or rehabilitate existing pavement to design them to accommodate the heavier aircraft. And it stipulates that a weight ban cannot be used to limit noise.

Mr. DeCota says that the company's lobbying efforts are behind the F.A.A.'s proposal to open Teterboro to the huge \$40 million jet. At 110 feet in length and with a wingspan of 117 feet, it is larger than any planes now landing there.

F.A.A. Position Criticized

David L. Bennett, director of aircraft safety and standards for the aviation agency who drafted the proposal, denied any such thing.

"The F.A.A. has never taken a position that any particular plane would have to be admitted," he said.

For its part, the Port Authority has passed a resolution to continue the ban. "The F.A.A.'s position is, in our view, completely inconsistent, not only in what is in the community's best interest but in what we consider serving the aviation needs of the region," Mr. Coscia said.

In the meantime, Representative Rothman recently succeeded in getting both the House and the Senate to continue the ban, and now the two versions are awaiting reconciliation and final passage.

"If we throw out weight limits and require local operators against their will to upgrade their runways to handle larger and larger planes," Mr. Rothman said, "what's to stop the F.A.A. from demanding that 747's be accommodated at Teterboro Airport?"

The efforts of the Port Authority and Mr. Rothman have left Steve Barlage, the New Jersey-based director of regional sales for Boeing, frustrated.

"The issue is not Boeing against Teterboro," Mr. Barlage said. "It's against a localized restriction. Once one community starts restricting access, it can spread to other places, and you don't have a homogenized government entity. It becomes balkanized all over the place, a situation in which our industry would be paralyzed."

Asked what he would say to residents fearful of a 737 crashing into a heavily populated neighborhood much as the smaller plane did in Hasbrouck

TheBattleOverTeterboroFromRomancetoHostility.txt

Heights four years ago, he responded, "I don't know how to assuage their fear." After a moment, he added, "The 737 has the best safety record of any airplane ever built."

That is little comfort for the Bowmans, who say the crash in their backyard had some lasting effects.

"My daughter was young enough, she seemed to shake it off, but my son won't go on an airplane," Gil Bowman said. "We went to Florida and we had to take the train. Eventually, if he doesn't get over this, we'll have to seek professional help for him."

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