



December 2, 2019

Jackson Hole Airport Board
Rick Braun, President

Dear Members of the Jackson Hole Airport Board,

We are writing today concerning a recent proposal by Wind River Aviation for operating scenic helicopter tours out of Jackson Hole Airport. We are aware the board is holding a special meeting on this topic Dec. 16, but due to our regularly scheduled meetings, the council may not have much opportunity to participate.

The board certainly is in a difficult position, given that the FAA has jurisdiction over the airspace and provides significant public funding for airport infrastructure. We recognize that this funding comes with limitations on the board's authority. With efforts such as the Fly Quiet program and working with the FAA on refining flight paths, the board has shown a sincere commitment to stewardship of Grand Teton National Park and our surrounding public lands.

Given the history of the last scenic helicopter tour proposal and strong community opposition to such operations, we feel it's important for the council to weigh in and offer a few insights and suggestions.

In July 2001, after Vortex Aviation sought and ultimately received permission from the FAA and airport board to operate helicopter tours, the council passed Resolution 1-16 (attached) stating that such tours may disturb the peace and quiet of noise-sensitive areas, may disturb and distress wildlife and "may pose an increased safety risk with resulting negative impacts on the financial and other resources of local law enforcement agencies, firefighters and emergency medical service providers."

Backed by both of Wyoming's U.S. senators and the governor, the council urged the FAA to implement a temporary ban on helicopter scenic tours "pending a full FAA study of the economic, safety and environmental impacts of such tours."

To the best knowledge of staff, airport administration and other stakeholders, this study was never done. The current council has reaffirmed its support for Resolution 1-16.

The town's position has not changed. Since 2001, the pressures and impacts on our public lands – Grand Teton National Park in particular – have only grown. Given the threat of climate change to our environment and our economy, the town and county have pursued multiple initiatives to conserve energy and reduce pollution. Operation of scenic helicopter tours runs counter to these initiatives and the stated goals of the Jackson-Teton County Comprehensive Plan.

If the board should receive a formal application to begin operating helicopter tours, we ask the board at a minimum to table the matter until the question of the FAA study can be resolved, or the study itself is done. There also are several outstanding issues regarding the Air Tour Management Act of 2000, including whether the National Park Service and FAA have set consistent guidelines for drafting of an air tour management plan. No such plan exists for Grand Teton park.

In July 2000, the board enacted a 120-day moratorium on helicopter tours until it could clarify legal issues. The board extended this moratorium in August 2000 and sought to make it permanent. In October 2000, the FAA rejected the request for a ban on helicopter tours and essentially lifted the moratorium.

Still, the following year, a coalition of community groups again petitioned the FAA, this time for an emergency regulation until the study mentioned above could be completed. The late U.S. Sen. Craig Thomas had introduced new legislation that sought a permanent ban on scenic overflights of Grand Teton and Yellowstone national parks.

Sen. Thomas recognized that Grand Teton park is unique, home to the only commercial airport operating inside a national park. "The safety and environmental issues discussed at length in the emergency petition present a strong argument to expedite your agency's study of helicopter tours in Teton County," he wrote to the FAA administrator.

We concur and are grateful for Sen. Thomas' wisdom. Please refrain from taking any action toward allowing helicopter tours to operate at Jackson Hole Airport until we receive further clarification from the FAA or the many outstanding issues are resolved.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mayor Pete Muldoon, on behalf of the Jackson Town Council

cc: Jim Stanford
Jonathan Schechter
Hailey Morton Levinson
Arne Jorgensen
file