

Guest Opinion



by Raymond A. Syms

Saving an Endangered Species

ESTABLISHING AND RETAINING heliports is increasingly difficult. As the number of helicopters and heliport landings grows, so does community opposition to helicopters. The result is a proliferation of ordinances restricting heliport operations.

Many municipalities have an outright prohibition on all heliports. The reasons for these prohibitions are many, but nearly all center on quality-of-life issues for neighboring land users. Noise, safety, pollution, and property values are typical objections voiced by community members.

The media exacerbates this anti-helicopter sentiment. Rarely do we hear of people rescued, time saved, deals made, and corporate mobility increased thanks to the helicopter. Typically, coverage of helicopters in the media means a crash or other negative public incident. This only lends fuel to the fire.

Because of these issues, land-use regulations and administrations are becoming more conservative. A good number of existing heliports were approved much less formally than most contemporary heliports. In several recent heliport cases, the validity of previous approvals was challenged, and the heliport's very existence was seriously jeopardized.

The closure of the 60th Street heliport in New York City is one such case. The good news is that a number of other heliports have survived such challenges. But even these few survivors continued operations only after agreeing to changes in operations, including flight paths, types of helicopters, and frequency of operations.

Facing opposition

There are more and more "us vs. them" conflicts between heliport management and community residents. An example is the belligerent Helicopter Noise Coalition, an anti-helicopter faction in New York City. In this continuing battle, the industry is unquestionably on the losing side. With the outright closure of the 60th Street heliport and severe restrictions placed on the 34th Street facility, all three of the city's remaining heliports (the third is on Wall Street) face uncertain futures.

Well-organized opponents of heliports enjoy the support of local and federal politi-

cians who have, in the past, closed or restricted such facilities, and even supported legislation to further limit helicopter traffic. For two administrations, the Manhattan Borough President's office has operated a Helicopter Task Force as a focus point for anti-helicopter factions.

The stated purpose of that task force is to close all heliports in New York City. Local helicopter industry representatives have had no success in changing the direction of that task force. Similar anti-helicopter groups exist throughout the United States and overseas.

The squeaky wheel gets the grease. These vociferous citizens groups are only a tiny per-



centage of the population. They did not feel their concerns were being addressed by the helicopter industry, so they went political. The vast majority of the general public is still open to learning the "unspun" facts. A greater PR effort can get these people on our side.

Here's what operators can do. First, publicize the usefulness of your helicopters, especially in local disaster and emergency preparedness programs. Participate in a helicopter awareness day or a career day at a local school.

Also, respond directly to individual community concerns. Change a flight route if you get complaints and let the complainants know you responded to their concerns. Return calls from people who have a noise complaint and hear them out; talk with them as if they were your neighbors.

Stay above 2,000 feet AGL if and when you can. Don't fly low over residential areas, especially at night. Look to the Helicopter Association International's Fly Neighborly Program for more ideas on how to incorporate it into your operations.

When you see or know of another helicopter pilot (including a military one) who is not flying neighborly, reach out as a peer and see if these practices can be modified. The general public lumps all helicopters together, and we collectively pay the price for inconsiderate pilots.

The time to cure a defect in a past heliport approval or operational policy is not when it is under fire from opposition. In some circumstances, the complaints of many citizens about certain operations are indeed valid.

Almost without fail, once the threatened heliport became sensitive to the needs of the community, most responsible citizens were satisfied with the results and accepted the heliport. A good deal of the success of new heliports can be traced to a willingness from the very beginning to integrate community concerns into siting and design efforts.

Grassroots activism

Every member of the industry must work on a grassroots level. Deal honestly with the community when concerns arise. Be compassionate, consistent and strive for long-term solutions.

There are no magic bullets to the challenges our industry faces. Heliport managers and helicopter proponents can achieve success at the local level by respecting community issues. The helicopter industry needs to be proactive, not just reactive, to threats and complaints.

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