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## Allegiant Air's proposed flights to Las Vegas create controversy at Everett's Paine Field

By Lynn Thompson  
Times Snohomish County Reporter

EVERETT — Paine Field Airport will never be another Sea-Tac Airport.

With just one runway long enough for commercial jets and no room for significant expansion, the takeoff-a-minute thunder of a big-city hub isn't on anyone's flight plan.

But the proposal by a small commercial airline last month to begin offering twice-weekly flights from the Everett airport to Las Vegas has rekindled fears in surrounding communities that residents' quiet suburban lives will be drowned out the din of engines.

"I don't know why I should give up my quality of life so someone can go gamble in Las Vegas," said Cathy Reese, a former Mukilteo city councilwoman, who has fought against expansion of Paine Field for nearly 30 years.

She and other opponents of commercial service say Paine Field should continue to play a supporting role to aerospace companies such as Boeing, whose production factory and delivery center are adjacent to the airport, and to the small private planes that regularly fly in and out.

But business leaders and airport advocates say the county can't refuse commercial service without jeopardizing federal grants for airport improvement that since 1945 have totaled \$57 million. Another \$50 million in repairs to taxiways and runways are needed in the next five years, according to airport officials.

"If the county comes out with a 'Hell no, we don't want you' stance, it could have serious ramifications for Boeing and for Paine Field," said John Monroe, a retired Boeing executive who continues to work with the numerous aerospace suppliers that have moved near the airport over the years.

### Controversy erupts

The current controversy erupted last month when Allegiant Air, a low-cost carrier based in Las Vegas, said the growing population of Snohomish County coupled with the transportation gridlock on the Interstate 5 corridor made Paine Field an "excellent candidate" for commercial-airline service. The airline asked to begin negotiations with the county.

County Executive Aaron Reardon and a majority of the County Council quickly condemned the proposal and said they would not provide any financial incentives or in any way encourage commercial



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service at Paine Field.

The cities of Mukilteo, Edmonds, Mountlake Terrace and Lynnwood all passed resolutions against commercial service. Citizen groups quickly charged that increased air traffic would lower everything from property values to WASL scores. And they noted that entire neighborhoods, including the Harbour Pointe development in Mukilteo, have been built on assurances that the airport's character wouldn't significantly change.

The airline causing all this trouble, Allegiant Air, has bucked the general downturn in the industry, worsened by rising fuel prices, by creating a niche market flying out of small airports to vacation destinations in sunnier climes, said airlines analyst Michael Boyd.

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Allegiant started service out of Bellingham International Airport in 2004 with two to four flights per week to Las Vegas. Since then, it's added flights to Phoenix/Mesa, Reno/Tahoe and in the next two weeks will expand to San Diego and San Francisco.

Flights out of Paine Field would likely resemble those from the Tri-Cities in Eastern Washington, where Allegiant flies twice weekly to Las Vegas, said Tyri Squyres, director of corporate communications for Allegiant Travel Co.

#### Not all against

Some Snohomish County residents welcome the prospect of more convenient air travel. Deana Dean, who lives in Arlington, said the hour-and-a-half commute to Sea-Tac Airport, coupled with the two-hour advance arrival time recommended by airlines, makes getting to the airport "pretty much a day trip."

The possibility of commercial flights at Paine Field seems to arise about every 10 years. In 1987, San Juan Airlines launched passenger service, but discontinued the flights after about a year.

Horizon Air explored service in 1997, but instead bought bigger planes to expand its passenger capacity at Sea-Tac.

For years, opponents of commercial service at Paine Field argued that a policy statement known as the Mediated Role Determination precluded airport expansion beyond general aviation, aviation-industry-related uses and private commuter flights.

A review by a citizens panel appointed by Reardon concluded a year ago that federal law does not allow Snohomish County to prohibit or limit scheduled passenger service. But it also said the county does not have to subsidize service and can make airlines pay their own way.

Allegiant, for instance, noted in its initial query that the current 1,000-square-foot terminal at Paine Field isn't adequate for the 150-passenger MD-80s it hopes to fly.

The county, in its response to the airline, made it clear that it wouldn't be upgrading any facilities.

Boeing has no official position on commercial flights from Paine Field.

#### Noise a concern

The major concern with expanded commercial service is the potential increase in noise. Four Mukilteo schools are located within the approach to Paine Field, and the school district said it would be concerned about any additional disturbance.

The noise footprint made by jets taking off and landing at Paine Field has shrunk by nearly half since 1980 because of quieter engine technology, said Dave Waggoner, director of Paine Field.

He said that a standard industry measurement of noise, the Day Night Level (DNL), has shrunk to within the boundaries of the airport and Boeing property.

While the MD-80s in Allegiant's fleet are older planes, they still meet current federal standards for quieter engines, said Daniel Zenk, Bellingham airport manager.

Paine Field does get regular noise complaints from the surrounding community. The airport logged 879 complaints in 2007, according to the airport's annual report, but the report notes that five people made 36 percent of the calls.

The noise complaints also don't necessarily reflect the volume of air traffic. The airport received 179 complaints in 2002, a year that saw a record number of 201,000 flights. Complaints rose to 902 in



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2006, although airport activity dropped to 138,000 flights.

"It's not like a car that you hear in the background," said Lynnwood City Councilman Ted Hikel. "They fly quite low. When it goes over your house, you stop talking or turn up the TV to hear. It's very noticeable," he said.

Since the initial outcry by county politicians, some other elected officials have argued that Allegiant's proposal should at least be discussed.

County Councilman John Koster, the lone vote against the county resolution discouraging commercial flights, said that the county should first find out how many flights a day Allegiant would operate, what the airline needs for parking and terminal facilities and what it is willing to invest.

"Let's at least have a conversation instead of a knee-jerk, blow-it-off response," Koster said.

The city of Everett, meanwhile, is waiting for completion of a \$70,000 study on the feasibility of commercial flights at Paine Field. That report is due by the end of the month.

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