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LOCAL NEWS

Published: Sunday, July 13, 2008

Snohomish County talks big but can't ban flights

By **Jerry Cornfield**
Herald Columnist

Snohomish County Council members are acting as if they can bar Allegiant Air and its ilk from Paine Field, knowing full well they can't.

They're talking smack in public and they're passing formal resolutions vowing to do all they can to prevent any future arrivals and departures of Allegiant Air jetliners.

Supporting them every step and echoing their every syllable are residents and elected leaders in the cities of south Snohomish County who seem genetically predisposed against passenger-filled planes flying over their neighborhoods.

Historically, such bellicose behavior by these forces scared big name airlines from seriously attempting to add the local airstrip as a new stop.

They're getting nervous since Allegiant Air wrote the county describing Paine Field as "an excellent candidate for service" and wanting to negotiate a contract to begin flights to Las Vegas.

Even as the economy stumbles, gas prices soar and the number of air travelers decline, it's not made Paine Field too financially risky for the firm.

In June, company officials toured the site and as of last week as many as a dozen phone conversations between corporate and county negotiators had occurred.

With the quickening pace, you can practically hear the roar of the jets.

Foes, for the first time, appear to have lost the upper hand. To regain it they are taking to court and Congress in hopes of costing Allegiant Air so much time and money it gives up.

This strategy is not unlike the "poisoned well" approach deployed against Clay Bennett in the SuperSonics battle -- and will probably have about as much success.

Playing the legal card may win concessions on the number and schedule of flights but is unlikely to secure a total victory.

In Congress they'll find U.S. Sens. Maria Cantwell and Patty Murray and Reps. Rick Larsen and Jay Inslee are informed spectators seated comfortably in the bleachers. They want no part of the federal law change opponents are expected to seek.

Under existing law, the Federal Aviation Administration gives money to airports with the requirement they don't block any type of service. Opponents want an exemption to let Paine Field receive money without accepting commercial service.

Won't happen, said Larsen, the former Snohomish County councilman from Arlington who serves on the House panel overseeing the FAA and aviation laws.

"I can assure those folks the committee leadership is not going to support them. I am not going to pursue an exemption for those folks," Larsen said.

Cantwell, a resident of Edmonds, received a briefing from the FAA and concluded that this is all a local issue. Inslee, who represents south county, said it's the community's decision whether to forgo federal dollars to keep Allegiant Air out and he'll respect the outcome.

Opponents aren't easily discouraged.

"This is a test. We'll see what everyone will actually do," said Joe Marine, Mukilteo's ever-defiant mayor.

"If we can make Allegiant walk away, it will be a little bit harder for the next one," he said.

Contact political reporter Jerry Cornfield at 360-352-8623 or jcornfield@heraldnet.com.

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