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DeKalb-Peachtree Airport keeps public info in its secret hangar

BY JOEL GROOVER

My neighbor, Thomas Swendiman, didn't need to file an Open Records request to confirm his fears that DeKalb-Peachtree Airport, better known as "PDK," now allows flights by massive, eardrum-busting DC-9s. The evidence was hard to miss.

"I was driving down Clairmont Road and one of them was right there on the west side of the airport," the retired engineer said. "I thought, 'Holy smokes! It's huge!' I drove to the house, got the camera, went back and started taking pictures."

I saw Swendiman's photograph of the USA Jet Airlines DC-9 on a flier distributed by PDK Watch, a neighborhood group that guards against the airport's expansion. I was stunned. DC-9s weigh at least 90,000 pounds and are among the loudest aircraft their size.

Activists worry that the former country airstrip, which opened with dirt runways in 1941, could become a regional hub for ever-larger planes. That could harm the health and property values of thousands of people. Studies link airport pollution to cancer, asthma, depression and more. I take the research seriously: My father, who flew jets for 30 years, died of kidney cancer, which disproportionately affects pilots.

Even if you couldn't care less about the airport, you should be outraged by the arrogant way DeKalb County runs it. Airport management continues to flout the state's Open Records Act in a way that hampers public discussion of PDK's future and could set a precedent for more government secrecy.

A lawsuit filed May 14 by attorney D. Brandon Hornsby accuses DeKalb officials of ignoring or improperly denying more than 100 Open Records requests in an effort to conceal the truth about PDK -- that it routinely accepts aircraft with takeoff weights far heavier than the 66,000-pound maximum dictated by the county's 1987 contract with the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration.

The suit accuses airport Director Lee Rimmel and DeKalb County CEO Vernon Jones of catering to powerful businesses eager to take advantage of the airport's proximity to Atlanta. It also alleges that officials have allowed owners of PDK-based aircraft to evade at least \$28 million in property taxes.

The Open Records requests seek flight data from PDK's Airport Noise and Operations Monitoring System, which turns the FAA's raw radar stream into reports that can be used to figure out the size, weight, noise level and base of operations for all planes using the airport.

The county acquired the system in the 1990s but bars taxpayers from seeing the reports it generates. Airports all over the country release this information. Many even post it online.

Quick! Hide that jet!



STEALTH AIRCRAFT: On March 4, a DC-9 rests on the PDK tarmac.

(Thomas Swendiman)

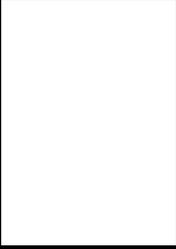


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So how can PDK justify withholding such information from the very citizens who own the airport? PDK and the FAA are parties to an interagency agreement that includes what Hornsby describes as a "highly unusual" confidentiality clause. He says Rimmel uses the agreement to deny requests under Georgia's Open Records Act for PDK flight data and relies on sympathetic FAA officials to maintain the secrecy.

I called Rimmel, but he declined to talk about the suit. The scheme allegedly works like this: Citing the interagency agreement, Rimmel refers Open Records requests to FAA Southern Region officials; the officials then send a form letter explaining that PDK flight data can be obtained only through a federal Freedom of Information Act filing; they then deny the requests, forcing lengthy appeals.

One Atlanta resident, Evelyn Brethour, had the patience to appeal her filing all the way to D.C. The process took more than a year, but in a March letter to Brethour, an FAA assistant administrator described lower officials' rejection of the request as "inexplicable." Leverenz also wrote that requests for data from the noise-monitoring system are a PDK matter, and that nothing prevents the airport from releasing the data.

Still, the game continues. The latest ruse is the 2004 "PDK Visual Observation Survey" in which the airport recruited 64 community volunteers to sit like birdwatchers, logging takeoffs and landings in March and April. Officials plan to add the unscientific observations to an environmental assessment -- even though the noise-monitoring system already paints a perfect picture of the flight traffic. "You can just imagine all these people out there at night pointing at the sky," Hornsby said. "It's unbelievable."

Whatever the survey shows, PDK Watch says it can prove oversized aircraft routinely use the airport. Incomplete FAA transponder data supplied by a consulting firm shows 13 takeoffs and landings by DC-9s, 20 by Gulfstream Vs and 10 by the Bombardier Global Express in February. All weigh more than 66,000 pounds. One can only guess about the full numbers.

And that's the point. Taxpayers have a right to know -- not just guess -- what's going on at a publicly funded airport. Otherwise, why even have an Open Records Act? If voters choose to let PDK spread its wings and become a regional hub, so be it. But a covert campaign to lay the groundwork for "Hartsfield North" is a shameful abuse of the public trust.

Joel Groover is a freelance journalist who lives in the Drew Valley neighborhood.

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