



*June 2004*

*This DC-9 Jet parked at PDK Airport on March 4, 2004, weighs at least 90,000 lbs. and holds up to 85 passengers. Similar noisy, oversized, polluting jets now routinely use PDK, in violation of a long-standing 66,000 lb. PDK weight limit. Courtesy of Tom Swendiman.*

## **PDK Airport Expansion: What You Need to Know**

In 1986 when my wife and I moved into the Hawthorne neighborhood, we didn't realize that we were buying a home just two miles as the jet flies from the second busiest airport in Georgia after Hartsfield-Jackson International, in terms of its annual number of flights. We also didn't realize that DeKalb Peachtree Airport (better-known as PDK) covers an area larger than New York's LaGuardia, or that plans were then underway to extend one of the airport's two parallel runways from 5,000 to 6,000 feet, thus allowing larger and noisier jets to use PDK.

For the past 26 years, concerned that expansion of PDK Airport could threaten the quality of life and home values in the many previously established neighborhoods surrounding the Airport, I have been an active volunteer with PDK Watch and its predecessor citizen-action groups in trying to prevent damaging PDK expansion and seeking to mitigate the many noise and pollution problems that PDK Airport causes adjacent residential neighborhoods such as ours.

*This article will highlight three key issues that PDK Watch and related groups of concerned citizens have tackled over the past several decades. It also will explain why many concerned citizens are convinced that continuing vigilance is essential to protect our quality of life and home values from the potentially negative impact of ill-conceived PDK Airport expansion in the future.*

**1. The 1,000 Foot PDK Runway Extension during the late 1980s--**The first major PDK Airport move away from being a small, relatively unobtrusive general aviation airport came with the 1986 plans to extend one of Airport's two parallel runways by 1,000 feet. The runway extension was supposedly being undertaken only to provide an additional margin of safety (a so-called "displaced threshold") for existing types of aircraft already using PDK, not to allow larger and noisier jets to use PDK in the future.

Neighborhood leaders were understandably suspicious that if a runway were extended to 6,000 feet, larger jets would start using PDK Airport, causing serious noise and pollution problems in long-established established residential neighborhoods around the Airport. Concerned citizens thus formed an organization that took PDK Airport and DeKalb County (which owns PDK Airport) to court. Their argument was that a full Environmental Impact Study must be conducted before any extension of the runway should be permitted.

In their response to the suit, both PDK Airport and DeKalb County made legally binding assurances to the 11th Circuit Court that aircraft weighing more than 66,000 lbs. would not be allowed to use PDK Airport in the future. Based upon those assurances, the Court ruled in 1987 that a full Environmental Impact Study was unnecessary since the runway extension would not involve larger aircraft using the Airport.

To no one's surprise, however, by the late 1990s much larger aircraft such as Gulfstream IV's and V's that greatly exceeded the 66,000 lb. limit weight limit began to use the Airport, including some DC-9's (see the photo). These violations of the assurances made to the 11th Circuit Court led concerned citizens to threaten a lawsuit to enjoin the Airport and the County to abide by their promises not to allow such larger Aircraft to use PDK Airport.

*Although no such lawsuit regarding the weight limit violations has yet been filed, the threat of such a lawsuit appears to have inhibited--though far from entirely prevented--larger aircraft using PDK during the past several decades.*

**2. PDK-Related Expansion Proposals During the 1990s: A Major Green-space Area Threatened**--Throughout the 1990s, many Airport-related land-use and expansion proposals damaging to the surrounding neighborhoods were proposed--and successfully blocked--by the efforts of PDK Watch and other concerned citizens.

Only one of those many cases will be briefly highlighted here: In mid-1990s, the developer Beverly Lance, son of Burt Lance, proposed to lease this 30-acre green-space noise buffer land located on PDK-owned land across Clairmont Road from the Airport. He planned to cut down most of the trees and create a golf driving range there, with lights blaring every night along the perimeter of the land until 11 p.m., even though the area is immediately adjacent to residential areas in Ashford Park. Fortunately, widespread outrage at the proposal eventually led to its being dropped.

Why was the proposal a bad idea? The green-space area in question had served for decades as a vital noise buffer for the Ashford Park community, significantly reducing PDK Airport noise impact there, especially during the warmer months when the leaves are out. The area is also a key watershed and water absorption area, so if its trees were cut down major flooding problems would probably occur in surrounding neighborhoods. And the area is one of the few examples of green-space land that DeKalb County already owns in its northeastern area; once its trees are gone, the area's character cannot be recovered. For more than two decades, residents of the area have tried to get this 30-acres of green-space protected by a permanent green-space easement or by some other means, but government officials have always come up with excuses to sidetrack the proposals.

*Although the 1995 proposal to lease and redevelop the 30 acres of green-space noise-buffer land across Clairmont Road was eventually defeated due to the widespread public outcry, similar ill-conceived proposals that could destroy this irreplaceable green-space area may well be brought forward once again in the future, now that this area has become part of the new City of Brookhaven.*

**3. The PDK Open-Records Lawsuit in 2004-5**--In the 1997, PDK Airport purchased a state-of-the-art Airport Noise Monitoring System (ANOMS) that among other things was supposed to provide the Airport and the public with reliable information to set to rest public concerns about what was happening at the Airport. Soon after the ANOMS system was operational, however, the public access to any of the information that the system was producing was totally blocked. After more than 100 citizen requests for that information under the Georgia Open Records Act (GORA) had been denied, in 2004, concerned Citizens finally brought suit against DeKalb County to secure access to the ANOMS information to which they were legally entitled under the Georgia Open Records Act.

On August 8, 2005, after an 18-month PDK Open Records Lawsuit (Feltus v. DeKalb), the Court ruled in favor of the plaintiff Mickey Feltus on all eight counts, requiring that DeKalb County and PDK Airport fully open their computerized records about PDK Airport flight activity to the public. This means that the computerized PDK records about all types and sizes of aircraft, their registration numbers, and noise generated by the aircraft has had to be made fully available to the public since then. The released records revealed that more than 200 aircraft operations per month were being conducted by oversized aircraft that violated the County's 66,000 lb. weight limit agreement.

*Although this is only the briefest summary of the extraordinarily complex PDK Open Records case, one of the most important results of the success of the plaintiffs in that case is that ordinary citizens who have been disturbed by flights from PDK Airport are now able to secure information that allows them to contact the owners of problem aircraft themselves. For information about how to do this, see the PDK Watch website, [www.pdkwatch.org](http://www.pdkwatch.org).*

To conclude this article on a more positive note, ever since Mike Van Wie became the new Director of PDK Airport in the spring of 2010, there have been important indications of more cooperative and less confrontational relations between PDK Airport and the concerned public. In the next issue of this *NBCA Newsletter*, I hope to be able to provide a full account of one path-breaking example of such cooperative effort that is now underway.

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