

THE FAA PLAN TO LOWER THE HARTSFIELD FLIGHT CEILING OVER PDK AIRPORT BY 3,000 FEET:

An Example of Successful Cooperation Between PDK Watch and PDK Airport

PDKWatch Inc. is a citizen watchdog group that for more than two decades has monitored proposed changes at DeKalb Peachtree Airport (PDK) that might negatively impact surrounding residential neighborhoods—including our Hawthorne Elementary School area, which is roughly two miles from PDK Airport as the jet flies. PDK Watch also strongly supports efforts to mitigate existing noise and pollution problems caused by PDK Airport operations.

Because of such efforts, PDK Airport supporters have often criticized PDK Watch for supposedly being an "anti-Airport" group that "always" opposes whatever PDK Airport wants to do. This article, instead, focuses on one recent example of active cooperation between PDK Watch and PDK Airport in calling the public's attention to a potentially damaging new Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) plan that might have negatively impacted both PDK Airport operations and the noise and safety conditions over surrounding residential neighborhoods.

In early December 2009, the FAA announced that it planned to lower the height at which Hartsfield-Jackson jets could fly over many areas of metro Atlanta. Over PDK Airport, in particular, the FAA planned to lower the current flight ceiling by 3,000 feet—from 8,000 to only 5,000 feet above sea level (or 4,000 feet above ground level). After the flight ceiling was lowered, then all PDK Airport flights would have to be conducted below that significantly lower Hartsfield-Jackson flight ceiling.

In early January 2010, PDK Airport's assistant director Mike Van Wie contacted me as PDK Watch's Communications Director and made an unusual proposal. He suggested that PDK Airport and PDK Watch might actually share a common interest in opposing the FAA's plans to lower the Hartsfield-Jackson flight ceiling over PDK Airport (and hence also over our neighborhoods). For the Airport, he said, this lower flight ceiling would greatly hamper operations since aircraft would have to fly for considerably longer distances at lower levels over the surrounding residential neighborhoods. For the surrounding neighborhoods, in turn, the necessarily lower PDK aircraft flight levels would mean that the radius of the surrounding neighborhoods negatively impacted by PDK jet noise might be roughly doubled.

I brought Mr. Van Wie's concerns to the attention of PDK Watch Inc.'s Board of Directors and PDK Watch decided to sponsor a public information meeting about the issue at the Clairmont Baptist Church on February 17, 2010. At that meeting, Mr. Van Wie and Airport Director Lee Rimmel—as well as representatives from the neighborhoods—presented different perspectives and concerns. PDK Watch itself, as an organization, did not take a formal stand for or against the proposed FAA flight ceiling changes, but PDK Watch did strongly encourage concerned citizens to voice their opinions, whatever they might be, at the FAA's public hearings on the issue.

The strong opposition that both Airport and neighborhood representatives expressed at the FAA hearings apparently contributed to a delay the FAA's plans to lower the Hartsfield-Jackson flight ceiling over metro Atlanta and PDK Airport. Two years later during the spring of 2012, the FAA held a second round of hearings at which further public input was presented on the issue.

In early 2013, the FAA finally announced its decision about lowering the flight ceiling. Its decision—which went into effect on March 7, 2013—had been significantly modified from the original FAA plan. Instead of a 3,000 foot lowering the Hartsfield-Jackson flight ceiling over PDK Airport and surrounding neighborhoods, the FAA only lowered the Hartsfield flight ceiling by 1,000 feet, a level that would have only a negligible impact on PDK flight operations and on PDK Airport noise over the surrounding neighborhoods.

This example of successful cooperation between PDK Airport and PDK Watch in publicizing concerns about the FAA's plans to drastically lower the Hartsfield-Jackson flight ceiling over PDK Airport suggests what concerted and cooperative efforts can sometimes achieve—even in the face of a Federal plan that was initially presented as being a "done deal."

—Larry Foster, PDK Watch Inc.
Communications Director