

# CONCERNS ABOUT IMPACT OF PDK AIRPORT MASTER PLAN ON RESIDENTIAL AREAS

by Larry Foster, NBCA Board Member and Communications Director for PDK Watch Inc. [www.pdkwatch.org](http://www.pdkwatch.org)

The DeKalb Peachtree (PDK) Airport is the second largest airport in Georgia after Hartsfield-Jackson in terms of numbers of annual flights. PDK Airport is located about two miles as the jet flies from our North Briarcliff neighborhood, so PDK's expansion has the potential to negatively impact our own quality of life and property values, as well as those of many other residential neighborhoods surrounding the airport.

## The Airport's Master Plan

PDK Airport is currently conducting a Master Plan to determine the Airport's development over the next twenty years (see [www.pdkmasterplan.com](http://www.pdkmasterplan.com)). PDK Watch Inc.—a neighborhood watchdog group that seeks to protect established residential neighborhoods near PDK Airport from damaging airport noise, pollution, and expansion—has been closely monitoring the development of the Master Plan during the past year, and we are disappointed at some of the growth projections and types of information made available to the public.

## Planning for Increased Demand and Larger Planes

Why are we disappointed? In determining the likely future demand to use PDK Airport, the Master Plan projects the *highest possible level of demand*, greatly in excess of the Federal Aviation Authority's (FAA's) own projections. When asked to explain the discrepancy between the two projections, the Master Plan spokesman said that the deviance was still within *allowable* limits, but he never explained why such a dramatic increase in Airport use—which could significantly impact our neighborhoods for the worse—was considered likely by the Airport.

In addition, the model aircraft chosen for the current PDK Master Plan is the Gulfstream 550, which has a maximum takeoff weight of 91,000 to 93,000 lbs., yet the current PDK runways have only been engineered to routinely accommodate aircraft weighing less than 66,000 lbs. The justification for choosing a model aircraft that is significantly higher than the engineered weight of the runways has yet to be convincingly explained.

## Importance of New Hangars

The new Master Plan also envisions the creation of eight or more new hangars for the larger aircraft that it expects to attract to PDK Airport. These new hangars would be built *outside* the current fenced perimeter of the Airport on part of the 15 acres of land bought out for noise abatement purposes that



*This DC-9 was photographed at PDK Airport. A DC-9 jet weighs at least 90,000 lbs., holds up to 85 passengers, and is very noisy. Photo by Tom Swendiman.*

the DeKalb County Commission had set aside in 2000 as a greenspace noise buffer. After the City of Chamblee annexed all of PDK Airport and rezoned the land, the Airport cut down 5-6 acres of trees in that land in 2018 and announced plans to build new hangars there. Since preventing the creation of new hangars is one of the few ways in which impacted residents are able to limit damaging Airport growth, they see this as a vital issue.

## Need to Study Noise and Pollution Impacts First

Inseparable from these and other concerns about the PDK Master Plan's proposals is another crucial underlying issue—the absence of information about the impact of larger aircraft on PDK noise and pollution levels.

In 2010 a proposal to study PDK's noise and pollution was drafted by representatives of DeKalb County, PDK Airport, and Open DeKalb, Inc., a citizens group that had brought the need for the study up to the DeKalb CEO's level. The CEO and the PDK Airport Director agreed to approve the study, in the wake of the discontinuance of the previous Master Plan effort in 2006.

Unfortunately, the \$450,000 multi-year environmental study of PDK Airport noise and pollution impacts by an Emory University Professor in the Rollins School of Public Health did not produce any meaningful results. The study was supposed to use real-time data on air and noise pollution from three different size/weight categories of aircraft to determine whether it would be responsible to allow PDK airport to be developed for regular use by larger aircraft. The data collection began in 2011, but then stalled and failed completely after the Emory professor

admitted that his methodology for analyzing the air and noise samples was flawed and unworkable.

## Delaying the Necessary Study

In 2018, DeKalb County officials agreed with Open DeKalb that the Emory study had not been able to obtain meaningful results and promised to fund another environmental study. For nearly a year now, Airport Director Mario Evans has been talking about putting together a meeting of Georgia Environmental Protection Agency (GA EPA), federal EPA and Georgia Department of Transportation (GA DOT) representatives to discuss with him and Open DeKalb the parameters for such a study.

The PDK Master Plan process still continues, even though no meeting to determine the parameters for the new environmental study has yet materialized. A *preliminary* meeting to discuss what should be included in the new study is now envisioned for January 2020.

## Summary: Do Not Approve a Master Plan Without Knowing the Impacts of Larger Planes

To summarize, in 2010 the DeKalb County CEO, PDK Airport Director, and Open DeKalb agreed that an environmental study of the relative noise and air pollution impacts of small, medium and larger aircraft at PDK might allow the County to proceed with a Master Plan for the Airport's development if the Commissioners had solid information about the pollution and health impacts of the Airport shifting to larger planes.

The County does not yet have that information. The Commission will not be in a position to approve a valid Master Plan without the information that all agreed was required to move forward with a Master Plan that used a larger model aircraft.

*Open DeKalb Inc., the entity with the most expertise on this issue, is working to communicate to the Airport, the County Administration, and the County Commission that a valid environmental study of the unanswered pollution and health questions regarding the regular use of PDK by larger jets must first be conducted before the Board of Commissioners may properly consider and approve a new PDK Master Plan. Open DeKalb is working to get the information that the Commission needs to support a new Master Plan and is hopeful that a new environmental study will be forthcoming.*