

# As Din of Aircraft Grows, East Hampton Reclaims Power to Regulate Airport

By JAMES BARRON

EAST HAMPTON, N.Y. — Frank Dalene never put the sign on the roof, the big no-trespassing sign that he wanted helicopter pilots approaching the East Hampton airport to read if they circled too low over his house.

Fed up with walls that shuddered and shook, and conversations that were drowned out by the thunder of helicopter engines, he had a yellow-and-black sign in mind that would read, “If you are below 700 feet, you are trespassing on my property.”

Now, he said, the sign had become unnecessary, because four of the five members of the town board promised not to apply for any more federal grants for the airport. The town’s last grant expired on Wednesday, and on Thursday, town officials said they had reclaimed the power to set airport rules and regulations, including limits on takeoffs and landings — a power they said they had surrendered to the Federal Aviation Administration under the terms of the grants. The fine print prevented them from restricting airport operations.

“That’s the gist of it,” said the town supervisor, Larry Cantwell.

And so the next round in the noise war at the East Hampton airport began quietly, with nothing more than the sound of a calendar page turning.

Mr. Cantwell said the town had received more than 25,000 complaints about noise at the airport in 2014, more, he said, than the complaints about noise at far busier airfields like Logan International Airport in Boston or O’Hare International Airport in Chicago. Day in and day out,



GORDON M. GRANT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Peter Wolf is among the East Hampton residents calling for limits on airport use to reduce noise.

those airports handle commercial jets far larger than could land on the 4,255-foot-long main runway in East Hampton.

But East Hampton sees a parade of private jets and helicopters, especially in warm weather, and residents like Mr. Dalene say it is a parade they hear.

In 2014, the town received 797 noise complaints during the Fourth of July weekend, up from 189 for the days around that holiday in 2013. A tally for August of this year showed 2,258 noise complaints, with roughly one complaint for every two helicopter takeoffs or landings (and helicop-

ters accounted for half of all the complaints). There were about 1.6 complaints for every jet arrival and departure; for propeller-driven aircraft, including seaplanes, there was roughly one complaint for every 10.

The same tally suggested that homeowners were making their frustration known: The 2,258 complaints came from only 138 households. Some people in East Hampton say that reflects the us-versus-them mentality that divides Manhattanites with summer homes from those who live here all year.

Mr. Dalene started keeping

track of helicopter noise in 2008 and was a co-founder of the Quiet Skies Coalition, a group of eastern Long Island residents who say a surge in flights in the last few years has disrupted their lives. “We’re coming to a consensus as to what the solutions are,” Mr. Dalene said.

He sees helicopters as a particular scourge, particularly with the debut of services with smartphone apps for bookings. But he does not want the airport shut down completely.

“As hard as I am fighting to oppose these helicopters, I will fight to preserve this airport for pilots

because this is the airport I love,” Mr. Dalene said. “I’m not against the airport. I love the airport, but I love it for what it once was.”

It once was an airport for small planes with weekend pilots at the controls, but it has become another sign of the money that is drawn to the Hamptons. Helicopters and private jets cut the travel time to Manhattan and avoid the crowded roads.

Mr. Cantwell said helicopter traffic had increased 47 percent in 2014 from 2013.

He said one of his constituents had invited him over for a drink in the backyard on a Friday evening. As he sipped wine and chatted, or tried to, as many as a dozen helicopters flew overhead on their way to the airport. “It was disturbing, nerve-racking noise,” he said. “If you’re directly impacted by traffic flying at reasonably low altitudes, yeah, helicopter noise is very disturbing.”

Peter M. Wolf, an urban planner, compared the noise from aircraft to the pollution of an aquifer, the underground layer of rock and sand that stores groundwater.

“If you had a single location that’s polluting all the water in a community,” he said, “you’d want to do something about it. Well, we have a single source that’s polluting a peaceful environment and to some extent the air in a community. Something needs to be done about it.”

He and Kenneth Lipper, an investment banker who was a deputy mayor of New York City during Edward I. Koch’s administration, have suggested banning helicopters and seaplanes in the months when demand is highest — May through October.

They have also called to limit takeoffs and landings to four per hour, and they want the airport’s hours to be shorter than those at many banks, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mr. Wolf said he and Mr. Lipper had hired lawyers, who had concluded that the town could impose such restrictions.

Even some helicopter operators have suggested restrictions. Kurt Carlson, the chief executive of Heliflite, one of the charter helicopter companies that serve the airport, has met with town officials and suggested, wider approach and departure routes at peak times. That would provide some relief for homes that are in what are now fairly rigid flight patterns. He said in an interview that the town could also raise landing fees during peak periods as a way to discourage traffic.

Mr. Cantwell, the town supervisor, said the grants that expired at the end of 2014 had totaled “a few million dollars.” But one analysis prepared for the town indicated that the airport could support itself and even borrow money to do capital improvements without money from the F.A.A., or from local property taxes. Another analysis mentioned potential new sources of revenue, including vacant industrial-park sites on town-owned land adjacent to the airport.

Mr. Cantwell said he expected the town board to decide on what action to take before the weather turned warm and pilots began putting the airport’s coordinates into their navigation systems.

“It’s not the town board’s agenda to close it,” he said. “We’re just trying to react to the 25,000 or more complaints we’re receiving.”