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Sep. 30, 2008
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FAA: Planes can't fly these crowded skies

Aviation officials say tall buildings constrict airspace

By BENJAMIN SPILLMAN
REVIEW-JOURNAL



Hubris and audacity helped create the current Las Vegas skyline.

The people in charge of flying aircraft into Southern Nevada hope common sense makes some contributions to future versions.

On Monday, officials from the Federal Aviation Administration said Las Vegas is a textbook example of how building booms crowd airspace and that new obstacles are already cropping up that could complicate flights in the region decades from now.

Panorama Towers is shown in Las Vegas on Sunday as a commercial airliner flies in the distance. FAA officials said Monday that the building boom crowds airspace and new obstacles are already cropping up that could complicate flights in Southern Nevada decades from now. Photo by David Becker/Review-Journal

"You still see a lot of construction up and down the Strip," said Del Meadows, the FAA's air traffic manager for the Las Vegas district. "Every new building takes another piece of airspace away."

Meadows said the impact of one building, such as the 1,149-foot Stratosphere tower, won't cause too many problems on its own.

But an accumulation of tall buildings over time can eventually make it more complicated for planes to arrive and depart and contribute to congestion in the skies.

In Las Vegas, the practical effect is a limit on the options air traffic controllers have to guide planes into and out of McCarran International Airport.

For example, when controllers guide incoming and outbound traffic using McCarran's north-south runway, they need to account for the Stratosphere tower.

Meadows said the location of the tower -- along with restrictions related to Nellis Air Force Base to the north -- make it nearly impossible for controllers to create a set route for planes

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heading north from McCarran.

Instead, controllers need to direct the planes as they gain altitude and go around the tower.

"The Stratosphere itself actually caused quite a few difficulties for us," he said.

The tower, completed in 1996, is the second-tallest structure west of the Mississippi River, according to the Infoplease Almanac. When it was proposed, the FAA said it would present a hazard for air traffic control.

But the tower was built anyway, which Meadows and Kevin Haggerty, manager of the FAA's obstruction evaluation service, say shows how little power the agency has to restrict building.

To make up for the lack of veto power, the FAA depends on collaboration with local jurisdictions to reduce conflicts between new buildings and airspace.

The collaborative approach paid dividends last year when the FAA, Clark County officials and developers of the proposed Crown Las Vegas project negotiated a compromise that reduced the potential height of the planned tower from 1,888 feet to no more than 1,064 feet. The Crown Las Vegas was eventually scrapped.

Meadows says FAA controllers view the skyline as a slope rising from the airport. The slope corresponds with how high aircraft can climb and maintain a safe distance from structures on the ground.

Therefore, a building that wouldn't be a problem several miles from the airport could restrict air traffic closer to the runways.

"If someone wants to build something that penetrates that slope, that is a problem," Meadows said.

While officials say they are doing a better job collaborating with local governments to prevent new buildings from poking above the slope, potential future problems are already emerging about 25 miles southwest of Las Vegas.

Developers would like to install giant electricity-generating wind turbines about 10 miles from the proposed Ivanpah airport, a facility that's expected to eventually handle air traffic in addition to McCarran.

Ivanpah won't open until 2018 at the earliest, but some officials in the FAA and in Clark County are already worried about the proposed turbines.

One of the concerns is that the rotating turbines will be picked up by radar and cause confusion for air traffic controllers.

Meadows says there's already equipment that filters buildings and other static objects from the view of radar. But the equipment can't filter out moving objects, such as turbines.

"It will show up just like it is an airplane," he said.

The turbines have already spawned a case that was decided in federal appeals court on April 18.

In the case, the judge ruled in favor of Clark County, which alleged the FAA made an error when it decided the turbines wouldn't be a hazard for Ivanpah.

The decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit threw out the FAA ruling and ordered the agency to take another look at the issue.

Meadows and Haggerty made their remarks at the Mirage as part of an FAA conference on managing airspace.

Contact reporter Benjamin Spillman at bspillman@reviewjournal.com or 702-477-3861.

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Rodman wrote on *September 30, 2008 04:10 PM*:

Those of us who have lived in LV for many years can remember back when there were businesses on Paradise and Tropicana including a large shopping mall on the northwest corner, several mobile home parks on Tropicana between Paradise and Koval, and a rather large group of homes on Eastern basically between Sunset and Patrick. As I remember it, all of these business and residential areas were condemned and torn down so as to create a safe buffer zone around McCarran. Later, as the number of flights and planes using McCarran increased we find the airport selling this land and the county commission approving same for development(although they claimed not to know what the sale was for) aka the large shopping center located on Eastern and Patrick and the development of condos etc. around Tropicana Avenue between Paradise and the strip. It seems strange that this area created around the airport would be sold to developers at the expense of flight safety that the zone was originally created for, but I guess its all about the money. Consequently then, it seems to me to be a little late for the FAA to be worrying about crowded airspace and flight patterns at McCarran. Then again, maybe this is just a ploy to be brought up again when the summerlin fly overs come up for consideration.

Brad wrote on *September 30, 2008 03:44 PM*:

Bill,

What they need to do if they are landing from the north, is that they fly over Frenchman's Peak/ Sunrise Mountain, direct to the Stratosphere then turn inbound (south) from there. There is a chance when they are landing to the south and departing to the east that they may fly east towards the Stratosphere, fly over it (or fly slightly north of it), then turn southbound towards the runway. When departing, they'll fly northbound then turn westbound north of the Stratosphere. As far as Ivanpah, the Clark County Dept. of Aviation said that Ivanpah would only be used for cargo and int'l operations, while McCarran would be domestic. So either way, we'll have the same problem.

Honestly, this is just going to turn into the story of builders developing around the airport, complaining that the airport is ruining everything, and move the airport, when the airport had been there years before they even thought of building.

NVTanner wrote on *September 30, 2008 11:45 AM*:

Well if the FAA would get going on the new GPS system that has been tested and not yet deployed, there wouldn't be a problem! The current radar system is too antiquated and should be replaced. As with anything our government does, it takes way too long to get something updated and approved like a 700 billion dollar bailout!

Roger wrote on *September 30, 2008 08:36 AM*:

That airport is big enough. There just has to be a limit on the amount of planes that come in and go out. It's about greed, greed and greed. Developers need more and more, but the only hope for Vegas is growth control.

Joel Rossetti wrote on *September 30, 2008 06:40 AM*:

McCarren is nothing compared to Kai Tak (Hong Kong) before that airport built on a man made island opened. You could look into people's living room as you made your approach to that single runway in the middle of Kowloon City. Plenty of desert landscape to open a new airport connected to LV with high speed trains.

Bill wrote on *September 30, 2008 04:39 AM*:

Since when do airplanes fly over the Strip? They have to go around the Strat if they want to land from the north. They've had to deal with the Strat since 1996 so what is the point of this story? How about when Ivanpah is built we shut down the north-south runway and let Las Vegas build as tall as it wants? Thankfully the county doesn't have to listen to these FAA morons or we would have a puny skyline with no Stratosphere.



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