

Preface:

The following exchange is representative of the ongoing dialogue between residents of Venice, the City of Venice government and the General Aviation community regarding the Venice Municipal Airport.

It was not the intent to publish these letters to be critical of the opinions and positions of those who have an interest in the airport. However, it does serve to underscore that there are indeed alternative viewpoints, an obligation to respect concerns and a constant need to correct misinformation, distinguish fact from fiction, perception from reality.

For instance, the present Airport plan, designed to effectively remove 22 of 24 homes out of the Gulf Shores neighborhood after years of public debate and discussion, simply does not represent an “airport expansion.” In fact, it is quite to the contrary. If the modifications are completed as proposed, the Venice Municipal airport would actually be slightly “contracted.” Runway 13-31 would remain the same available length for take offs and landings and be displaced closer to the Intracoastal waterway, thus removing 22 of 24 homes out of the Runway Protection Zone (RPZ). The FAA and City of Venice have insisted, *repeatedly*, that they will under no circumstances condemn these or any other homes located adjacent to the airport.

Runway 22, preferred for noise abatement and mitigation, would actually have an available landing distance over two football fields shorter than its present 5,000 feet. As proposed, the airport plan does not accommodate aircraft any larger than it does at present, nor does it reduce its utility to the aircraft it presently serves.

So the question remains, “what airport expansion?” The answer remains that the Venice Airport extended all the way north to the hospital and has gotten progressively smaller over the past several decades through a series of airport land sales. More are possible.

The question has been answered, repeatedly. There is no expansion of facilities. No accommodation of bigger aircraft. It’s just the compromise that gives everyone as close to everything as possible.

Still, there are critics, using semantics, misinformation and scare tactics to detract from a workable solution brokered by the previous City Council. Ironically, some of the current opposition to the proposed plan comes from the very residents who were adamantly opposed to being in the RPZ in the first place.

Feb. 2, 2011

Dear Members of the City Council :

I have never written a letter like this before, but I am very concerned about the airport expansion for a number of reasons. I cannot attend the meeting on Thursday so am writing you now.

I think the environmental and health impacts are very significant, and I am amazed that there has been no Environmental Impact Statement. The times I have heard a jet land are always memorable because of the very loud noise and strong smell of jet fuel. The fact that the environmental impact on some of the rare animal and plant life has not been looked into is especially important. Caspersen Beach and the neighboring beaches have a unique ecosystem that includes some very rare plants and animals. On a recent nature walk, I asked the guide if there were any similar environments to Caspersen that I might visit. He could only suggest Lover's Key.

In an era when Floridians are encouraged to reduce their lawns because of the pollution of gasoline mowers and lawn treatments, it's ironic that the increased carbon footprints of jets planes would be encouraged.

The health impact of increased jet fumes is also an important issue for this primarily elderly community. I'm not a senior citizen yet, but my asthma is worse when the air is full of fumes from the airport (across the road from us), so I can only sympathize with those who have even greater respiratory and circulatory problems.

The fact that the expanded airport plan was not presented to the community, especially those of us in Gulf Shores, is very disturbing. The idea of removing homes not only hurts those who would have to move, but also those who remain (not reimbursed), who have to live in a noisier, dirtier, and smellier, environment. We hope to live in our home for many years, but the lower home values caused by the expansion would severely impact those who must sell.

I am not opposed to the current airport size. Most of the planes are small. What concerns me is that other than some people who hold leases on the property, I do not understand who would profit from airport expansion. Expanding the airport is like shooting oneself in the foot. The relatively peaceful and quiet allure of this beautiful area would be gone forever, just so some millionaires can park their jets (possibly saving themselves money if Venice offers cheaper jet fuel, etc).

I urge you to keep the airport at its current size.

Sincerely yours,  
Terese Ann Alton

300 Shore Road, Venice FL 34285

February 10, 2011

Ms. Terese Alton  
300 Shore Road  
Venice, FL 34285

Dear Ms. Alton,

Your recent thoughtful letter (copy attached) concerning the Venice Municipal Airport to Mayor Holic and the Venice City Council caught my attention.

I am Chuck Schmieler, a neighbor and fellow resident of the Island of Venice. I have lived in the Gulf View section of the city for some 15 years. In the interest of full disclosure, I am somewhat well known and active in airport matters here in town. I am the president of the Venice Airport Business Association (VABA) representing the commercial interests at the Airport. I am also the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association Airport Support Network Volunteer here.

I chose to move to Venice for three reasons: my wife's asthma, the character of the town and the availability of the Airport which serves as my gateway to and from my business interests in six northeastern states. In other words, before I retired it's how I got to and from work.

I was struck by the tone and sincerity of your letter. I've always believed that if you can help a neighbor with a problem or concern you should. It's in that spirit that I hope you'll accept this letter and my seeming intrusion into your dialog with Mayor Holic.

As it appears that you may be new to town, as well as the Airport debate having possibly purchased your Shore Road home in 2010, I'd hope that you'd be kind enough to take a few moments of your valuable time to consider the following thoughts I'd like to share with you.

First a little history. The Venice Municipal Airport (KVNC) has belonged to the City of Venice, given to it by the US Government after WWII, for close to 60 years. In fact, I'd say it's fair to say the City grew up around the Airport and not the other way around. If you'd like more historical information about KVNC it's available on the City of Venice website. Look under the Departments drop down menu and select the Airport.

My research concludes that over the years, the Airport has continually suffered from everything from benign neglect to outright hostility, due in part to the unique nature of aviation on the one hand and the fact that the City is required to operate the Airport as an autonomous "Enterprise Fund" on the other. As you may be aware, the City is not allowed to withdraw money from an Enterprise Fund directly for the benefit of the City General Fund.

Much of this "came to a head" in 2007 when 3 folks were elected to City Council, each having a sympathetic ear towards a number of airport activists generally living in the communities contiguous to the Airport. Many of these activists asked questions similar to those outlined in your letter.

This led to a detailed multi-year examination (commencing in 2008) of the Airport, its past, present and future by a broad cross section of interested parties including the City Council, City Staff, City Airport Consultants, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), The Florida Department of Transportation Aviation Office, neighborhood groups and Airport users such as VABA.

Numerous public workshops and other meetings were held to consider a myriad of issues including those raised in your letter. Various alternatives were evaluated. Hundreds of thousands of Airport Enterprise Fund dollars (none from city real estate taxes) and thousands of hours of time by these groups contributed to the spirited and comprehensive debate. It's unfortunate if you were not involved because you did not yet own your current home. However, I can assure you (and the official record shows) that these public meetings did occur and that the community was noticed in advance as well as all concerns heard.

I believe that a number of significant and immutable facts came out of all of this effort:

1) The City of Venice has a permanent legal commitment to the people of the United States to maintain our Airport as an airport in perpetuity. Our Airport serves as an on and off ramp in the US National Airspace System in the same way that Interstate 75 Exit 193 drops cars and trucks off into Venice. Did you know that there are actually highways in the sky running north and south right past Venice?

2) The City is required by law to make the Airport available for use by any aircraft that is physically capable of utilizing its facilities on a non-discriminatory basis. This means that the City and or its voter/residents cannot simply deny access to an aircraft owner because he/she is a millionaire or owns a jet powered aircraft any more than we could deny access to Harbor Drive to a millionaire driving an expensive imported car. I would ask you to consider that the United States (and I like to think my own town) is made up of inclusive minded people who don't really believe that the size of your wallet should determine your access to public facilities.

Further, there are serious possible consequences to such discrimination including, at worst, the ability of the federal government to take the airport back. Some will tell you it can't happen. I can give you an example where it has. In fact, former Mayor Ed Martin made a comment at a City Council meeting that the FAA had opened a dialog with a local airport authority to explore just that option if the City could not reach a consensus and move the Airport issues forward.

3) The Airport needs serious repairs to minimize its environmental impact and preserve its utility as well as safety for users and the surrounding communities. In general, the most significant projects include the restoration of Runway 4/22 (which directs airplanes out over the Gulf of Mexico instead of Gulf Shores) and the shifting of Runway 13/31 (the runway obliquely facing your home) several hundred feet further away from you. None of the contemplated projects expands the footprint of the runway complex. And that's what determines in the final analysis if the airport is expanding.

You may have heard of issues concerning the Runway Protection Zone (RPZ) in your neighborhood. For the sake of brevity, I'd ask again that you visit the Airport section of the City website where there is a good explanation of the RPZ issue in the FAQ feature. I'd be glad to explain my perspectives on the RPZ if you're interested further.

On balance I'd say this has been a spirited, productive and helpful debate. We've never known as much about, or understood our Airport as well. However, the debate window has drawn to a close. The very same Council (elected in 2007) voted in the summer of 2010 to send an Airport Layout Plan (ALP) that embodied the design elements described above to the FAA for approval and, hopefully, eventual grant funding. We are currently awaiting final comments on the ALP from the FAA.

I'd like to take a few more moments to address some of the other specific points in your letter:

Environmental Issues. Although it is true that no up to date comprehensive Environmental Assessment of KVNC through, say 2010, exists, there are partial environmental studies that have been conducted in the last number of years. For example, the currently approved Master Plan Update (MPU) from the year 2000 (the accompanying narrative report to the ALP) contains data that indicates that there were no significant noise or air quality issues here. These data were based on an assumed traffic volume of approximately 164,000 operations (defined as a takeoff or a landing) in 1997.

Actual traffic monitoring and counting cameras were installed at the Airport recently which have proven that the amount of air traffic, and accordingly most likely the environmental impact, are about one half of what was assumed in the 2000 MPU.

This does not mean that we Airport users are not concerned with the impact of activities at the Airport on our neighbors as well as ourselves. To the contrary, I for one fully support expanding the Environmental Assessment which will be required as part of the Runway 13/31 project to include a complete suite of air quality and noise monitoring evaluations.

You may have heard that some of your neighbors have conducted their own fume and noise studies. I must caution you that these are anecdotal at best, without any validation or verification by qualified agencies equipped to evaluate test results independently against recognized standards.

While comprehensive environmental testing will be valuable, what's clear to me is the air traffic is here to stay and the best way we can positively impact ourselves and surrounding neighbors is to implement the ALP as described above simply because it encourages air traffic away from the neighborhoods to the north including yours.

Additionally, I am aware of no effort by the City of Venice to reach out to the aviation community at large to attract or encourage higher air traffic.

Health Concerns. Having lived with a serious asthma sufferer for over 40 years I can really sympathize. However, I am happy to report that my dear wife is much better when we are here on the island, the Airport activity notwithstanding. It's unfortunate if you did not consider your breathing problems when choosing your home directly across the street from an active airport. However, I'd suggest to you that the Island is a dirty place filled with fumes and noise from all sorts of commercial, municipal as well as private sources.

Property Values. I believe that it's well known that homes adjacent to the Airport and further away from the beach sell for less than those further north on the Island. In effect, the market has adjusted for their proximity to the activity at the Airport. Additional information in this regard is again available on the City website in the Airport FAQ section. I cannot understand how keeping air traffic further away from these homes (as in the proposed ALP) could make them worth less.

I am somewhat confused by your comment about removing homes. I am aware of no plans by the City to remove homes located near the Airport. If someone is telling you this they are doing you a grave injustice. In fact, the FAA has made it clear (and former Mayor Martin Confirmed) that the FAA has no authority to take homes.

Finally, I have investigated the current fuel prices here in southwestern Florida. Jet fuel sells for an average of \$4.22 per gallon at Sarasota, the next airport to the north of Venice and \$4.69 at Punta Gorda, the next airport to the south. The price here at Venice is currently \$4.74 per gallon. Please forgive me, however, it sounds again like your neighbors have been telling you things that simply aren't quite correct.

Fuel prices are the last thing I consider when deciding which airport to visit. Foremost in my mind is how close the airport is to my intended destination and next is what kind of facilities and services are available. I can assure you that no owner of a turbine powered airplane (jet or turboprop) goes far out of his/her way for lower fuel prices. The cost of moving the airplane far outweighs any possible fuel savings.

I apologize for the length of this letter. However, you have asked some complex questions that I believe deserve detailed answers.

I know there are folks in your neighborhood that are not satisfied with the way the City is proceeding. However, I submit to you that attempting to frustrate the process is counterproductive and not in the best interest of the City as a whole.

I believe that as neighbors we should try to understand each other's perspectives and find common ground to work through differences. Some in your community disagree and seem to feel airport users should be denied a role.

One thing, however, is certain. Should we fail to move forward more and more aircraft will use Runway 13/31 as Runway 4/22 continues to deteriorate until finally Runway 4/22 will be closed due to safety concerns from its deteriorated condition and more traffic will cross your community.

I would be pleased to meet you personally and discuss any of your concerns and perhaps give you a tour of the Airport.

Respectfully,

Chuck Schmieler