



THE TAOS NEWS

Named Best U.S. Weekly Newspaper by the Nat'l. Newspaper Assoc. 2007, 2008
Inland Press Foundation Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

Taosenos organize against flyovers

By Chandra Johnson

The Taos News

Cannon Air Force Base issued responses to *The Taos News* this week about its proposed low-altitude tactical navigation (LATN), just as a group of Taosenos is organizing to discuss the issue further. The organization, called the Peaceful Skies Coalition, is holding a public forum Monday, Sept. 27, 6:30 p.m. at Don Fernando Hall, 220 Civic Plaza Drive. Organizer Cliff Bain said Monday (Sept. 13) that the town of Taos was sponsoring the event and that one major objection was that the Air Force did not have choices for training elsewhere.

"There are less-populated areas where they could train," Bain said. "We will be supplying comment forms at the meeting."

Bain, along with fellow coalition member Mary Ann Soloway, remember military presence in Taos skies in the 1990s when B-1 bombers trained over the area. In 2000, the Air Force said in its final environmental impact statement that moving B-1 training missions to Texas was ideal, which they did.

The base said in an advertised notice published in *The Taos News* that it would be performing an environmental assessment of Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado to determine its viability as a training area for tilt-rotor Osprey crafts.

The majority of the training flights would take place after dusk with 95 percent taking place Monday through Friday, the Air Force's website reads. Aircraft would fly as low as 200 feet above ground level.

The notice states that pilots must avoid towns, wilderness, noise-sensitive and other specific areas. The plan is to conduct about three LATN trainings each day or nearly 700 flights a year, according to the Air Force's website.

Air Force Capt. Laurence van der Oord responded to *The Taos News*' list of questions on the proposal. Van der Oord said that while the trainings would not fly over Taos town limits, it would be difficult to estimate how often the potential trainings would fly over outlying areas such as Arroyo Hondo, Tres Piedras, San Cristóbal or El Salto.

He also said public comment was important to the process.

"It is difficult to gauge how the proposal would affect a specific area in the proposed LATN region at this point in the process. I think one big misconception floating around is that this process is much farther along than it actually is," van der Oord said. "The public comment period that we are in right now through Oct. 4 is a proactive effort to contribute to the

understanding of the proposal to initiate an Environmental Assessment (EA) on the LATN area. This public scoping effort is being taken prior to actually initiating the EA.”

Once the 30-day period is over, vanderOord said, Cannon will review each comment and make a decision about how to proceed.

Van der Oord also said that the public comment process was just the beginning of a long process that will involve the public’s input, an environmental assessment and environmental impact statement.

Soloway said that she hoped the meeting would draw experts in addition to concerned citizens.

“We want the Pueblo there and knowledgeable people who can speak to how serious this is,” Soloway said. “Tourists come here for peace and quiet. All businesses who service tourists would be affected.”

The coalition also objects to fuel emissions from the aircraft, sound pollution and the politics behind the training.

“I don’t think this training should happen anyway. Our military is missioned to go out and carry on war activities without any accountability,” Bain said. “I would like anyone to tell me how this can be characterized as defense. The fact is, we cannot create stability through blunt force and terror that these actions create.”

Van der Oord and the Air Force disagree, saying the trainings are highly important. “Realistic training is critical to the 27 Special Operations Wing’s ability to sustain combat-ready crews for worldwide deployment,” van der Oord said. “Operating in mountainous terrain allows the aircrews to prepare for the environment they face in today’s real-world taskings. The varied topography of the proposed LATN meets those terrain requirements.”

While the Air Force maintains the trainings are crucial to having skilled soldiers, Bain is skeptical. When asked if he is worried that to deny soldiers this training would put them in danger, Bain says there are alternatives.

“I’d like to have that conversation,” Bain said. “I’m fully confident that they’ll get the training without flying over our area. The fact that our young men and women are out there is all the more reason to have this conversation.”

To issue a comment to Cannon Air Force Base on the proposal, call (575) 784-4131 or e-mail 27SOWpublicaffairs@cannon.af.mil.