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Hundreds attend Taos forum to discuss proposed Air Force training flights; Cannon extends comment period

By Chandra Johnson

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Hundreds of Taoseños turned out to the Peaceful Skies Coalition's forum to discuss issues surrounding the Air Force's proposed low-altitude training flights Monday (Sept. 27)— including citizens of Taos Pueblo and some trained Air Force veterans.

The Town of Taos Council were also present to hear the comments of the more than 260 people to make amendments to a resolution opposing the training, which was adopted unanimously at the conclusion of the three-hour meeting.

The announcement of an environmental assessment the Air Force intends to conduct for its training has caused uproar in the Taos community since Cannon Air Force Base published public notice earlier this month.

While no officials from Cannon were able to attend the meeting, Taos Mayor Darren Córdoba opened the forum by reporting that base commander Col. Stephen Clark officially extended the public comment period to Nov. 15.

"I am adamantly opposed to these flights. Not only am I opposed, the council is opposed," Córdoba said.

The news came on the heels of Monday's letter from New Mexico Congressmen Sen. Jeff Bingaman, Rep. Ben Ray Luján and Sen. Tom Udall to Clark requesting such an extension.

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.

Many citizens said at the forum they were reacting negatively to the proposed

trainings from past experience. In the 1990s, B-1 bombers and other military aircraft trained in skies over Taos County, but were moved to other locations in 2000 amid the results of the Air Force's final environmental impact statement.

Adele Zimmerman told the crowd that she moved to Rinconada in 1977. She was one of many citizens who appealed on behalf of one of Taos' hallmarks — peace and quiet.

"Not long after that, I was treated to my first look at a CI-30 [Osprey]," Zimmerman said. "If one were to crash, it could wipe out my whole village. I recognize the military's need to train. But it makes no sense at all to endanger my health and safety to protect me."

Taoseña Sandra Richardson, like many others, contended the flights based on spirituality.

"I worship mother earth and father sky," Richardson said. "Please do not desecrate my church by chopping up the air of father sky and polluting the ground of mother earth."

Out of the vast majority of attendees present to voice opposition, two Air Force veteran pilots also spoke to try and make the public understand the Air Force's need for the trainings in Taos. The Air Force states that the topography of Northern New Mexico and southern Colorado is similar to combat areas in Afghanistan and Iraq where pilots will be flying.

Retired Brig. Gen. Hanson Scott was booed as he spoke, though Córdoba and others quickly tried to bring order to the meeting.

"We're sending those young men and women into dangerous missions around the world," Scott said. "It's important that they have a place to train. Its important that we give them the best training."

Retired combat pilot and Vietnam war veteran Gary Van Valin was similarly booed when he mentioned that he had been a pilot trained through Cannon Air Force Base.

"I am probably the only person in this room who has had low altitude tactical navigation training. Forty years ago, I was a fighter pilot at Cannon Air Force Base," Van Valin said. "The reason they fly low is because it's much safer than flying at medium or high altitude. It has to be learned somewhere."

Officials from Cannon reportedly plan to attend the next Peaceful Skies Coalition meeting, scheduled for Oct. 11 at 6:30 p.m. in the Kit Carson Board Room on Cruz Alta Road.