

## Who Needs the Moffett Runways?

Lenny Siegel  
September 2013

To ensure that the planned lease of Moffett Field serves the interest of neighboring communities and to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act, any proposed change in the operation of the runways or significant new activities on the former Navy base should be the subject of a new Environmental Impact Statement (EIS). Should the selected lessee simply plan to create a museum and educational center in Hangar One, a less exhaustive environmental study will be required, because that use was part of the preferred alternative studied in the 2002 Programmatic Environmental Impact Statement for the NASA Ames Development Plan.

In 1995 NASA, owner of the former Navy Moffett runways since 1994, and several air cargo companies proposed to open up Moffett Field to air package express operations, and local residents organized in opposition. We used public meetings about NASA's Environmental Assessment to mobilize opposition and pick apart the proposal. Then, in a November 5, 1996 advisory vote, 67.5% of Mountain View voters opposed commercial or other civilian air operations at Moffett Field. Opposition to non-governmental use of the Moffett runways in Sunnyvale, directly under the Moffett flight-landing path, was also intense. There is no reason to believe that public opinion has changed since.

Largely as a result of that election, NASA abandoned plans to expand non-governmental air operations. Instead, it consulted with residents of neighboring communities and created a development plan based upon partnerships with high-tech companies and educational institutions. That plan, subject of the 2002 environmental review, has been successfully implemented.

But times change. Last year NASA's Washington DC headquarters, showing disdain for the scientific accomplishments of one of its leading research centers and the success of its partnerships, sought to unload the now underutilized airfield. The White House Office of Management and Budget told NASA Ames that it, not the Navy, would



be responsible for restoring historic Hangar One after removal of its toxic roof and siding. And Congress tightened the budgetary noose around Ames and other federal facilities across the country.

Our Congressional delegation, led by Representative Anna Eshoo, fought to preserve this valuable asset in its present status as a limited use federal airfield, and they appeared victorious this May when NASA and the federal General Services Administration announced they were seeking private bidders to restore Hangar One and operate the airfield. This seemed tailor-made for H211, the private plane operator owned by Google's top management. Based in Hangar 211 since 2007, H211 had offered to restore Hangar One in exchange for the right to park its fleet of about eight planes there while sharing them with NASA for scientific research. But NASA headquarters meanwhile has decided not to renew the Hangar 211 lease when it runs out in 2014, leading H211 to seek other arrangements at San Jose Mineta Airport. Therefore it's not clear whether H211 will make a bid under the NASA-GSA request for proposals.

As the *Voice* reported on May 30, the request for proposals could lead to the establishment of a base for business jets at Moffett Field. Indeed, at an August 13 bidders' conference in San Francisco, several attendees with an interest in such operations took part. **Unless the residents of Mountain View, Sunnyvale, and other neighboring communities make ourselves heard, we could be stuck with unwanted flight operations slipped under our noses as part of the laudable objective of restoring Hangar One.**

While many of us can live with a continuation of the limited-use federal airfield, a private jetport would only be constrained by promises in the eleven-year-old environmental impact statement that is not only subject to change, but also would necessarily be updated to cover major changes at Moffett Field. It is time to ask, once again, "Who needs the Moffett Runways?"

When the Navy first proposed to vacate Moffett Field in 1990, I checked to see how important the runways were to NASA Ames' operations. The world-class wind tunnels use models, so it turned out that the runways were useful, but not essential to Ames' scientific projects. Since then, military uses have declined, though the California Air National Guard's 129<sup>th</sup> Rescue Wing remains, even though its costs are high and many of its staff live in the Central Valley. Lockheed-Martin Sunnyvale and Space Systems Loral have shipped national security and commercial satellite payloads out of Moffett on Russian-built Antonov and other cargo planes, but operations have shifted elsewhere and it's not clear how essential Moffett is to either. Despite Lockheed's desire for the convenience of rolling payloads from its Sunnyvale facility, it has never indicated an interest in paying to keep the runways open. And while Moffett is sometimes a convenient place for Air Force One to land when presidents visit Silicon Valley seeking campaign donations, that's no reason to keep the runways open.

Perhaps the strongest argument for keeping the Moffett runways in ship-shape condition is to be prepared for an earthquake or other natural disaster. Congresswoman Eshoo, who has been exemplary in her support for local communities on Moffett-related issues, has long promoted Moffett as a staging ground for emergency management activities. As her staff has repeatedly pointed out, that's what happened in the wake of the October 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake.

I've been learning, however, that studies since then have shown that Moffett's under-maintained runways are "moderately susceptible" to liquefaction. It would take a large investment to harden Moffett, as the San Jose Mineta Field has been upgraded, to resist the various earthquake scenarios likely in the future. Given the number of business jets that would be necessary at Moffett to pay to harden its runways, I suggest that we consider alternative uses. In fact, as long as the Moffett runways continue in operation, there will be proposals to boost flight operations.

In 1990, when the Navy first proposed to leave Moffett, I wrote a column for the *San Jose Mercury-News* proposing the creation of new, medium-density neighborhoods at Moffett Field, along with extending the Bay Trail (since done) and development of an air/space museum and educational center in Hangar One. Today that vision makes more sense than ever.

It's hard for people in other parts of the U.S. to understand, but our communities are being strangled by traffic caused by too many jobs. With Google and other high-tech firms hiring *en masse*, it won't be long before local freeways, roadways, and even bikeways become impassable. Housing prices and rents will continue to skyrocket. While that puts phantom profits in the pockets of those of us who have owned local homes for decades, it means that few of our children will ever be able to buy here.

Building new neighborhoods on the southern half of Moffett Field, complementing the NASA Ames Development Plan to create a unique community where people can live, work, and play while restoring wetlands along the bay, would relieve the commute while providing much needed housing for our growing working population. It would benefit Google and other high-tech firms more than having a more convenient place to park business jets. Plans already exist to build safely above the retreating remnants of the regional Superfund plume, because new construction can easily be designed to protect against vapor intrusion. Furthermore, the economic value of Moffett's land, to the federal government as well as local communities, would be far greater if planned for a new bayside community.

The total transformation of Moffett Field and closure of its runways does not have to happen overnight. But we must act now and let our community leaders, NASA, and the GSA know of our desire to see that Moffett is used for the community's needs and higher purposes vs. subjecting our communities to unwanted noise, environmental pollution, and accident risks sanctioned under the current GSA lease proposal request. **At the very minimum, the federal agencies should undertake a comprehensive environmental impact study comparing the consequences of the status quo with leasing proposals, such as an executive jetport, outside the scope of the existing EIS, as well as neighborhood development.**