

Doing the Wright Stuff  
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The ultimate decision whether to construct or expand an airport should be subject to local political process.

The moderator asked me to join this panel because of my experience in the political process that blocked construction of a commercial airport at the former Marine Corps Air Station El Toro in Orange County, California.

It was a tough eight-year battle that I've chronicled in my book, [Internet for Activists](http://www.eltoroairport.org/activists.html). (<http://www.eltoroairport.org/activists.html>)

[Internet for Activists](http://www.eltoroairport.org/activists.html) is a guidebook for using websites and e-mail tactics, field-tested in the successful fight against building El Toro.

We are focused today on one key element in the El Toro fight - the realities and public perceptions of aircraft noise.

From the very start, El Toro airport was ill conceived.

- No impartial study was made to determine whether an airport was the best use for the closed Marine base.
- No analysis was conducted as to whether El Toro would be the best location for expanding regional aviation capacity.
- Little thought was given to conflicts between and El Toro and the county's existing John Wayne airport just seven miles away.

Airport reuse of the former airbase was proposed because it had runways, and because NIMBY's near other airports saw El Toro as "Not in my back yard."

The push for El Toro airport began with leaders in the City of Newport Beach seeking to contain noise from the county's existing John Wayne Airport. The County Board of Supervisors adopted their cause. El Toro gained additional support from officials near Los Angeles International Airport who sought to reduce their airport burden.

None of the major players actually lived within a noise impact zone as defined by state law. But they expect that airport noise - regardless of the decibel level - had a major negative impact.

Early in the project's history, OC voters approved building an airport at El Toro.

However, in December 1996, the county released the first environmental impact report for the project. This step began the first real discussion of noise decibels and CNEL's. Airport opponents had a target to attack.

As we know, people don't really hear CNEL's. (or DNL's) They are statistics calculated over a long period from individual noise events that are added, weighted, and averaged.

With the release of the environmental impact report and its subsequent review, the residents of Orange County began to learn how those calculations were made. There came a growing perception that the calculations were like shooting off a gun in church and then averaging the noise impact with 24 hours of relative silence.

Through the anti-airport website and newsletters, and then in letters to the newspapers from activists, and eventually in large rallies, the general public got a message. "Paid pro-airport consultants were trying to pull the wool over people's ears."

The county mischaracterized noise of less than 65 dB CNEL. They treated it as though it had no adverse impact. They oversold their case. That was a public relations blunder.

Anti-airport activists published official reports of the noise complaints recorded at the county's existing John Wayne airport. The complaints overwhelmingly came from residents living well outside of the 65-dB CNEL zone. The conclusion was clear: If folks were unhappy with the noise in Newport Beach, then the use of the 65 dB CNEL standard was a deception.

In 1999, pro-airport county officials sought to calm the growing public opposition to their plan. They authorized nearly \$3 million for a flight demonstration intended to show that El Toro airport would not have a major noise impact.

The county rented eight aircraft, ranging in size from a 737-300 to a 747-400 freighter. They arranged for crews to fly 50 approaches and landings at El Toro during two days of demonstrations.

Airport supporters proposed the demonstration. They were confident that the widely separated noise events, occurring every hour or two and not during sleep time, would have little impact.

They expected that by narrowly confining the flights to the centerlines of the flight paths, only a small fraction of the population would see or hear the jets. They hoped that would make their point.

Airport opponents opposed the demo. They too expected that only a small fraction of the population would be bothered. Those who lived in the funnel of converging or diverging flight tracks that occur in the real world would hear nothing from planes confined to the centerline of the flight path.

Both sides' expectations were wrong.

On the first morning of the demonstration, residents were outside listening attentively for the arrival of the initial 747. They began to complain of noise even as the aircraft circled off the coast.

The approach path brought the planes over many homes at below 3,000 feet. They descended to less than 1,500 feet over the retirement community of Leisure World. When the aircraft came over, waiting residents were shocked by how low they were.

They telephoned to report their observations to county phone numbers that were published in the press along with the flight schedules. However, officials hadn't anticipated the public reaction and hadn't planned for enough phone lines to handle the calls. When complaints poured in, lines were overloaded, voicemail boxes quickly filled up, and tempers rose.

Frustrated residents expressed their anger by e-mail to our website. Our volunteer website team saved hundreds of the messages, published them on the Internet, printed out hard copies, and distributed batches of the reports to the news media.

The messages said that schoolteachers stopped talking to their classes until the jet noise passed. Children were frightened. Homeowners swore that they would give up their dream houses and move if the airport came.

To worsen the public relations disaster, county officials chased media reporters away from special sound monitoring equipment that the county set up for the demonstration. In contrast, ordinary citizens waved their Radio Shack noise meters for newspaper photographers and expressed anger to the numerous press and TV reporter covering the event.

The county backed off and characterized their demonstration as an "unscientific snapshot" of the noise. They withheld the official decibel measurements for months. By then, no one cared what the county had to say. When airport supporters showed their sound videotapes of the flights they were accused of turning down the volume. The reality of the noise measurements became meaningless.

A pro-airport county supervisor commented that some homes might need soundproofing. The Los Angeles Times jumped on the statement and headlined a story, "Insulating Residents from El Toro . . . Supervisor Smith says county should give sound-muffling materials for homes under flight path."

In Southern California, there is no way to soundproof residents' patios, swimming pools, and barbecues. His comment was a disaster.

The Orange County Register editorialized, "The Opinion pages received a near-record 140 letters on the subject in three days, many of which showed a deepening of sentiment or a new opinion formed, adding up to the biggest movement we've seen in this debate in quite a few months."

Like the famous Minutemen who fired upon redcoats at Concord bridge at the start of the American Revolution, there had been "a shot heard round the world." It figuratively was heard "round the world" by many whom never actually heard it.

Hundreds of thousands of residents were convinced that the planes were too loud.

Local clergymen formed a committee to preach the golden rule to congregants and urged them to spare their neighbors from the airport abomination. One prayed, "May only angels fly over El Toro."

Our El Toro website gathered studies from the Internet on the harmful effects of airport noise on children. We distributed printouts to school officials. We published an aerial photo of one of the demonstration planes flying right over a school. Eventually, several school boards and PTA's shrugged off arguments that they should stay out of political issues and took official positions of opposition to the airport project.

The political momentum in the battle over El Toro was turning against the airport.

Efforts to kill the airport through use of California's initiative process began just prior to the flight demonstration. In California, citizens' initiative measures can be placed on the ballot by petitions signed by ten percent of the electorate. An initiative that collects enough signatures then can be voted into law at a general election.

By the time that the demonstration jets flew over El Toro, volunteers had started collecting the necessary signatures for an anti-airport initiative. The rate of signature gathering doubled from the week before the demonstration to the week after.

For five months, nearly 2,000 grass roots activists gathered signatures at tables in front of markets, at community gatherings, and door to door.

A record-breaking 192,000 signatures were collected to place the anti-airport initiative on the ballot. Tens of thousands of small donors contributed over \$2 million for the election campaign. The measure passed with over 67.3 percent of the countywide vote.

Research shows that noise is especially annoying when citizens feel that those who govern in their name, using their tax dollars, have failed to protect them. After the flight demonstration, those who ran the Orange County government seemed unable to do anything to appease the public.

The pro-airport county leaders voted millions of dollars more for a final PR program called "Just the Facts". The public renamed it "Adjust the Facts."

Eventually, four successive El Toro airport program managers lost their jobs. The County Executive Officer was replaced in the resulting controversy. Last year, the pro-airport Chair of the Board of Supervisors was voted out of office. An anti-airport majority now runs the county government.

From the beginning, El Toro airport was a bad idea pushed by special interests.

- It is only seven miles from John Wayne airport.
- El Toro is ringed on three sides by mountains that military jet fighters can handle but which challenge commercial airliners.
- The Marines closed El Toro because encroaching residential communities prevented them from conducting their mission.

All that was needed to bring the project crashing down was the exercise of the democratic process by an informed public. The flight demonstration was not the deciding factor but it was a catalyst for that process.

Today, El Toro airport is dead, buried after eight years by a voter approved amendment to the County General Plan, which eliminated aviation zoning for the land. The Navy soon will sell the land for non-aviation uses.

We on this panel have been discussing "noise - expectations, perception, and reality." As an activist who has been in the thick of the fight, I assure you that between the three, the public perception of noise is of paramount importance in the political process.