

Tourist Helicopter Noise/ Comments

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Helicopters are, for the time being, until limits are imposed, unwelcome invaders of peace and quiet in the Juneau area. Possibly in smaller and quieter doses they would become as acceptable as the noise of fixed-wing aircraft, but as currently operated, they are inescapably and unacceptably intrusive. They are presently permitted to operate without any firm limits, only adhering, mostly, to agreements by the operators. There are presently no noise limits, either on volume or frequency. FAA is interested in safety only, not in noise, and CBJ has completely failed to regulate the traffic and its consequences.

My June 18, 2026 written comments submitted to the VITF remain valid. The VITF report and recommendations of August 26, 2026, do not resolve any of my concerns and are not likely to resolve the noise problem to the satisfaction of concerned residents and property owners.

Because there has essentially been no regulation of the helicopters' intrusions on Juneau residents, I conclude that CBJ must regulate the impact. Leaving it to the operators has not significantly reduced the problem and no other agency has either the responsibility or ability to do so. Because the flight operations begin and end in the CBJ, it must address the issue of tourist helicopter noise.

Here are the things CBJ should do now, and certainly before the next tourist season begins:

1. Impose a reduction of 50% on helicopter tourist takeoffs and landings from operator sites within the CBJ.
2. Adopt limits that reduce to a window of six hours the time for tourist overflights, and impose quiet times, probably after 5:30 each evening, so residents can go out on decks and yards to converse in normal tones, rather than interrupt conversations while flights of two, three, or four helicopters fly by, first in one direction, and then in another as out-bound and in-bound flights pass over.
3. Adopt meaningful flight minimums that are significantly higher than are now followed, both for departing and returning flights at the various current operator sites, and for transit over residential areas. The minimum should be 2,000 feet. The current minimums are too low, even at cruise, to reduce noise to non-intrusive levels, and way too low for passage over the route corridors used during departure and approach. Operators should be required to reach or maintain significantly higher altitudes before departing or arriving at airport property. CBJ should not allow lower cloud or fog ceilings to justify departures using lower minimums. The minimums should be observed regardless of the cloud cover. If a flight cannot fly safely above the minimum for the various routes and profiles, it shouldn't fly. The only exceptions should be flights returning (from the glacier, the usual destination) if the ceiling has lowered after the initial departure. People on the ground should not have to bear the burden of greater noise just

because the ceiling is lower. The operators can pass on any added expense of missed flights to passengers. Fewer flights can derive the same revenues for operators if they price accordingly. But the people on the ground cannot be responsible for subsidizing the tourist helicopter traffic or the operators. Achieving or maintaining higher minimums before leaving or entering airport boundaries will probably require faster climb rates and higher power settings, a consequence discussed below.

4. Create a website, accessible to the public, and require each operator using landing pads within the CBJ to post on it the numbers of its daily departures and arrivals, probably at weekly intervals. Those numbers will reveal the number of overflights on the routes the operators use.

5. Adopt noise limits for tourist helicopter flights leaving airport property based on both quantity and quality of noise on the ground in the route corridors used, adjusted for frequency. Frequency matters. If only one loud helicopter flies over a residence daily, the intrusion is much more bearable than if there are 20 overflights a day. Altitude matters, too. The noise of a helicopter at 500 feet is much greater than a helicopter at 1,000 feet. And total daily exposure matters. If all the noise is created in a one hour block, it is more bearable than interfering with 12 or 13 hours of peace and quiet.

About noise from tourist helicopter flights to the glacier:

The helicopters the Juneau operators use are inherently noisy. They are unavoidably noisy at takeoff and again at landing given power settings and constant main rotor, tail rotor, and transmission noise. They are just as loud and intrusive when landing as when taking off. Their limited passenger capacity results in frequent flights. The glacier round trips are short, permitting frequent flights each day by a given aircraft, i.e., frequent takeoffs, transits, and landings within the CBJ.

Airport noise is unavoidable, but fixed-wing aircraft create less intrusive noise. The biggest aircraft (737, executive jets) depart much less frequently and climb rapidly, usually follow noise abatement procedures, and land with very reduced noise. And the smaller fixed-wing aircraft typically are less noisy and less frequent than the constant helicopter traffic, and make much less noise landing, follow departure routes that don't result in extended and frequent flights over residences, and generally are not nearby as long as helicopters because their airspeeds near the airport are usually greater than the helicopters'. In addition, the largest aircraft are usually passenger aircraft that often carry Juneau residents, but the tourist helicopter passengers are rarely local residents.

About the consequences of the measures CBJ should adopt and impose:

Operators will contend that reducing the numbers of flights (and thus probably the number of paying passengers) will (1) financially harm the operators, and (2) prevent them from serving would-be-glacier visitors.

Both effects are fundamentally irrelevant because Juneau residents in the flight paths shouldn't be subsidizing, by giving up peace and quiet and property values, either would-be tourists or the operators. As to unserved tourists, there is no valid public policy reason why CBJ should

want to maintain the number of people who fly to the glacier; CBJ surely recognizes that disappointing would-be future hypothetical visitors is less important than serving the existing residents and property owners CBJ is supposed to serve.

As for the operators, the fundamental problem is that maximizing profits is at odds with conducting their operations at a level that destroys what makes Juneau an attractive place to live in. The existing order of things is not sustainable. On the other hand, if they are properly priced, even reduced flights will fairly and adequately compensate them. Reduced flights will result in scarcity of seats, increasing their market value, and will result in more economical operations (fewer aircraft, fewer operating hours, less fuel, less maintenance expense).

The entire tourist industry in Juneau is failing to price the attractions of the Alaska experience correctly. It has instead adopted prices that deprive the experience of its uniqueness, with bargain cruises and bargain flights. The volume of cheap tourism is at complete odds with the value of the product. Fair pricing of tourist flights will allow operators to achieve fair and substantial profits.

Finally, CBJ needs to take into account what should happen if it takes no action. The tourist helicopter operations diminish property values; comparable market valuations between homes under the flight corridors and those that aren't will reveal significant loss in values. Those corridors are at least 400 yards wide and cross over many homes. CBJ should expect affected property owners will eventually achieve significant reductions in assessed values. That would not help CBJ's finances.