

County of Santa Clara
Roads and Airports Department



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DATE: November 17, 2020

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Harry Freitas, Director, Roads and Airports

SUBJECT: Report on emergency capacity should Reid-Hillview Airport change use

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Under advisement from the December 4, 2018 meeting (Item No. 19): Receive report from the Roads and Airports Department relating to the region's capacity for disaster and emergency response if a change of use were to occur at Reid-Hillview Airport. (Roads and Airports Department)

FISCAL IMPLICATIONS

There is no fiscal impact to the County General Fund or the Road Fund.

CONTRACT HISTORY

None

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

At the December 4, 2018 Board meeting, the Board considered staff's proposed Business Plan for the County's airport system. At that meeting, Supervisor Chavez proposed numerous actions, which were approved by the Board of Supervisors, including direction to the Administration to communicate with the County's Office of Emergency Services partners relating to consideration of the region's capacity for disaster and emergency response if a change of use were to occur at Reid-Hillview Airport (RHV).

This memorandum provides background information and context for the role of RHV as a resource to support first responders in disaster and emergency response. This report does not include rigorous comparative analysis of replacement options. That type of analysis would be performed by public safety experts and consultants as part of an environmental impact review of possible reuse of RHV. The California Environmental Quality Act has rigorous noticing, review, and comment requirements to ensure public participation in any decision to change use at RHV.

Executive Summary

- RHV is a public general aviation airport located in San Jose. The airport has two runways and an Air Traffic control tower. The airport is available to all users including public safety personnel and first responders at any time.
- Two community-based, volunteer service organizations use RHV: RHV Disaster Airlift Response Team (DART) and the Civil Air Patrol (CAP). DART and CAP are not first responders. When requested they provide a supportive role and are not unique to RHV as these organizations are part of large networks with their counterparts based at other local airports.
- First responders, such as, San José Police and Fire, the Office of the Sheriff, and Santa Clara County Fire have not used RHV for disaster and emergency response. CAL FIRE is estimated to use RHV about once or twice a year for wildfire response. Its most recent use of RHV was to support the fire suppression response to the SCU complex wildfire.
- Other airports in the area that are available to support first responders in emergencies include San Jose International, Moffett Federal Airfield, Palo Alto, Hayward, San Martin, Livermore, Watsonville, and Hollister Airports if there were to be a change in use at RHV.

RHV Physical Context and Airfield and Aircraft Characteristics

RHV lies within the urban limits of San Jose, and is located four miles southeast of the city's downtown area. It is a public general aviation airport that operates 24-hours, every day of the year. The airport has a control tower, which is staffed from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., 7 days a week, by the Federal Aviation Administration. The airport currently has approximately 475 based aircraft and, in 2019, averaged approximately 570 flight operations per day.

The Airport is surrounded primarily by residential neighborhoods to the north, northeast, and west. Lake Cunningham Park and a closed golf course lie directly east of RHV and Eastridge Shopping Center borders the Airport to the south.

RHV has two parallel runways that are 75 feet wide by 3,100 feet long and two full-length parallel taxiways that are 40 feet wide. The surfaces are rated for 17,000-pound aircraft. Occasional use by heavier aircraft is allowable, but excessive use by overweight aircraft will lead to premature and unpredictable pavement failure. The loaded weight of aircraft is an important factor in determining the minimum runway length necessary for landing or takeoff. There are a few larger military aircraft including, but not limited to, the Lockheed C-130, Boeing V-22, Beach C-12 and Eads C-144 that can utilize RHV in emergencies but will exceed the runway weight limit.

Aircraft maintenance and fueling are provided by the airport's four fixed-based-operators (FBO), which are privately owned businesses on the airport property. A comprehensive

range of maintenance services are available primarily for piston-propeller aircraft. The FBOs also supply aviation gasoline for piston-propeller aircraft and jet fuel for turbine and jet aircraft. The FBOs sometime provide ground support for aircraft used in emergency response.

RHV is not usable for fixed-wing firefighting apparatus used by CAL FIRE. It's runways are too short and the aircraft are too heavy. CAL FIRE has a fixed wing base at Hollister Airport that houses spotter aircraft and two retired Naval S2 aircraft for initial attack. If additional resources are needed, CAL FIRE uses its fleet of C130 aircraft based out of McClellan Airport in Sacramento. If necessary, CAL FIRE will also deploy contractual aircraft for suppression using 747, DC10, or other large, heavy fixed-wing aircraft. These aircraft are also deployed from McClellan to fight fires in the Diablo Range.

Volunteer Service Organizations based at Reid-Hillview

Currently, the following organizations use or operate out of RHV. They are not first responders, but they may serve in a supportive capacity to first responders. These organizations are not unique to RHV, they are part of their respective networks and their counterparts are located at other airports in this region:

- RHV Disaster Airlift Response Team (D.A.R.T.) – The RHV DART team was founded in 2018 and is a volunteer organization operated by CAAPSO, the Community and Airport Partnership for Safe Operations. D.A.R.T. is a statewide organization that is prepared to provide assistance to communities where traditional routes of assistance are not available.

D.A.R.T. holds annual exercises across the state that involve multiple jurisdictions and have included the County's EMS. Watsonville, San Martin, Half Moon Bay airports also have active DART teams. North Bay Dart is a group of four, soon to be five, airports that share resources for a single DART team – Gness Field, Santa Rosa, Napa Anguine, and Petaluma. The team at Palo Alto Airport expects to participate in this year's exercise for the first time, creating another DART team.

- Civil Air Patrol (CAP) – The CAP is a civilian arm of the U.S. Airforce. There are two squadrons at RHV; a youth and adult squadron. The RHV squadrons were formed in the 1970s and are part of a national CAP organization that participates in regional search and rescue efforts, provides comfort in times of disaster, and works to keep the homeland safe.

Use of RHV by First Responders

The San José Police Department and, to a lesser extent, the Office of the Sheriff use the RHV terminal building on a regular basis to utilize the restrooms, microwave, and lounge area. They have not, however, used the airport for their own emergency responses.

The San José Fire Department and Santa Clara County Fire have not used the facilities for emergency response.

Over the past ten years, it is estimated that CAL FIRE has used RHV once or twice a year as a fueling and rest area for firefighting helicopters used in the local mountain areas. The location of Reid-Hillview, the availability of fuel for their aircraft, a hard, paved surface, airport security, and the availability of the terminal building contribute to making RHV a desirable facility when operations are occurring nearby.

Recent CAL FIRE Use of RHV as a Mobile Retardant Base

On August 23, 2020, CAL FIRE contacted RHV airport and inquired about the availability to use RHV as a Mobile Retardant Base to fight the SCU complex wildfire. On August 24, CAL FIRE deployed a Mobile Retardant Base consisting of two water tanks, a mixing station, and two retardant dip tanks to the north of the RHV runways. On Thursday August 27, three helicopters began using the base to fill their tanks and fight the SCU wildfire for three days. These helicopters flew approximately 49 missions and stopped on the afternoon of August 29. The helicopters did not land at RHV during the operation.

The operation covered about eight acres of flat ground at the airport consisting of some paved surface and mostly grass. The ATCT provided traffic control and civilian aircraft continued to use the airport while the CAL FIRE operation was underway. Approximately eight workers operated the mixing equipment that added the flame retardant to water for aircraft fire suppression.

The operation was managed by CAL FIRE Team 6 based in Pleasanton with support from local CAL FIRE based in Santa Clara County.

Additional Consideration for CAL FIRE relative to RHV

Discussions with CAL FIRE leadership provided the following information regarding the selection of RHV as a Retardant Base and the use of aircraft to fight the SCU complex.

To fight the recent fires, initial firefighting bases were established at San Martin Airport to fight the SCZ fire and the Sunol CAL FIRE station to fight the SCU fire. At the time CAL FIRE had limited fixed wing aircraft available due to their deployment at higher priority fires. In addition, the SCU fire had a low smoke ceiling which severely restricted the use of fixed wing aircraft. As the SCU fire moved south from the San Antonio Valley towards Coe Park a more southerly base was sought for helicopters and RHV was selected. Fixed wing aircraft for suppression activities at that point were deployed from Hollister and Sacramento McClellan

CAL FIRE's Sunol Station is often used as a helicopter base to fight fires in southern Alameda and northern Santa Clara County. As fires move south in Santa Clara County other options to Sunol would include flat sites without trees, other CAL FIRE Stations in Gilroy and Morgan Hill, San Martin Airport, and the Pacheco Fire Station in southern Santa Clara County near Casa de Fruta.

Civil Air Patrol (CAP)

CAP is part of US Airforce auxiliary, CAP was founded on Dec. 1, 1941 to mobilize the nation's civilian aviation resources for national defense service. Its current mission is to support America's communities with emergency response, diverse aviation and ground services, youth development and promotion of air, space, and cyber power¹.

As stated previously, the CAP is not a first responder, but may provide support for a variety of operations, not necessarily disaster and emergency response. The RHV squadron participated in counter drug operations, support for Superbowl 50, support of local sheriff and FBI missions, and approximately nine search operations per year involving Electronic Locator Transmitters (commonly known as black boxes).

Nearby Airports with Emergency Management Utility

There are numerous other airports in the area that may be used during an emergency and would be available if Reid-Hillview's use were to change in the future:

- San Jose International (SJC) is approximately five air miles to the north-west. It has an air traffic control tower (ATCT) and two commercial service runways that could accommodate almost all possible aircraft.
- Moffett Federal Airfield (NUQ) is a private use airport operated by Planetary Ventures, a subsidiary of Alphabet Corporation. It is located approximately 13 air miles to the north-west of Reid-Hillview. It has an ATCT and two parallel runways approximately 8,000 feet long capable of handling the largest aircraft available. There are many restrictions on use of the airport including a provision that requires prior permission to land (PPL).
- Palo Alto Airport (PAO) is a public use facility located 19 air miles to the north-west. It has an ATCT and one 2,400 x 70-foot runway. The runway size and configuration greatly limit the usability by emergency service aircraft.

¹ Civil Air Patrol Mission Statement. (www.gocivilairpatrol.com/about/who-we-are)
Board of Supervisors: Mike Wasserman, Cindy Chavez, Dave Cortese, Susan Ellenberg, S. Joseph Simitian
County Executive: Jeffrey V. Smith
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- San Martin (E16) is a public use facility, owned and operated by Santa Clara County. It is located approximately 20 air miles to the south. It is a public use uncontrolled (no ATCT) airport and has a single 3,100 x 75-foot runway. Most aircraft that could utilize Reid-Hillview could also utilize San Martin. However, the lack of an air traffic control tower reduces the total throughput of aircraft.
- Hayward (HWD) is a public use facility located approximately 30 air miles to the north. It has an ATCT and two parallel runways with the largest being 5,700 x 150 feet. It would be capable of handling many different sizes and types of aircraft.
- Livermore (LVK) is a public use facility located 22 air miles to the north-east. It has an ATCT and two runways, the largest being 5,253 by 100 feet and is capable of handling many large aircraft.
- Watsonville (WVI) is a public use facility located 23 air miles to the south-west of RHV. It has two intersecting runways, the largest being 4,500 by 149 feet. It is capable of handling many types and sizes of aircraft. However, the lack of an ATCT reduces the total throughput of aircraft.
- Hollister Airport (CVH) is located approximately 40 air miles to the south. It is a public use uncontrolled airport with two intersecting runways. The longest runway is 6,300 x 100 feet and capable of handling a variety of large aircraft. It is home to a CAL FIRE aerial firefighting base. The lack of an ATCT reduces the total throughput of aircraft.

CHILD IMPACT

The recommended action will have no/neutral impact on children and youth.

SENIOR IMPACT

The recommended action will have no/neutral impact on seniors.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

The recommended action will have no/neutral sustainability implications.

BACKGROUND

At the December 4, 2018 Board of Supervisors meeting, the Board considered staff's proposed Business Plan for the County's airport system. At that meeting, Supervisor Chavez proposed numerous actions approved by the Board of Supervisors including direction to the Administration to communicate with the County's Office of Emergency Services partners relating to consideration of capacity for disaster and emergency response if a change of use were to occur at Reid-Hillview Airport.

CONSEQUENCES OF NEGATIVE ACTION

The report will not be received by the Board of Supervisors

STEPS FOLLOWING APPROVAL

Send notice of MinuteTraq processing to: Pam Rebillot, Roads and Airports Department – Administration.