

DEATH



OF AN AIRPORT

BY BARRY SCHIFF

General Billy Mitchell once said, "If you would measure the heartbeat of a city, take the pulse of her airport." If this is taken literally, then the city of Santa Monica, California, must require intensive care because its airport is having a cardiac arrest, the result of an onslaught of municipal abuse and harassment.

Although Santa Monica Municipal Airport (SMO) is only one of many facing extinction, it has been attracting national attention because of the many legal issues involved (see July *Pilot*, "Washington Counsel," p. 110). And though the combination of elements that threaten this airport's existence at first may seem unique, there are lessons to be learned from this struggle for survival that, in one way or another, can be applied to other U.S. airports.

In addition to being one of the na-

tion's oldest airports, SMO is steeped in romantic history and aeronautical lore. It originally was named Clover Field in honor of Lt. Greayer Clover, an American pilot killed over France during World War I. Clover Field's birth date has been shrouded by the clouds of time; but, in 1924, four Douglas World Cruisers began the first flight around the world from there. It also is where the first Powder Puff Derby originated and where tiedown spaces were reserved during the 1920s and 1930s by such notables as Howard Hughes, Amelia Earhart, Wallace Beery and Wiley Post. Until a few years ago, SMO was the home of the Douglas Aircraft Company, and Runway 21/3 launched almost all of Douglas' propeller-driven DC transports and military contributions on their maiden flights (including, in 1941, the only example of America's behemoth super-bomber, the B-19).

Santa Monica Airport ultimately evolved into one of the most important

general aviation airports in the world, an integral part of the air transportation system of the Los Angeles basin and a vital link in the national air transportation system.

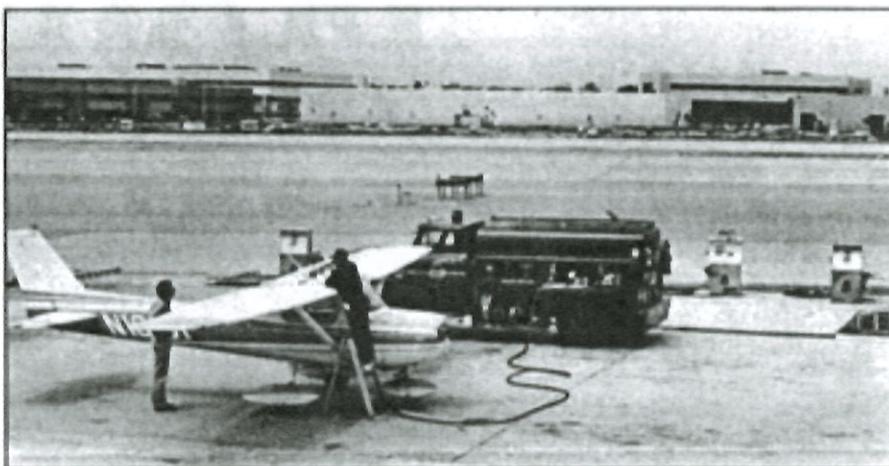
The airport's difficulties began when homeowners living near the departure end of Runway 21 realized that airport noise had become a popular environmental issue. The vocal and irate homeowners apparently had greater political clout than their number would indicate. The city reacted to their pleas by attempting to impose choking operational restrictions, such as banning touch and goes on weekends and a 100-decibel, single-event noise-exposure level (senel).

Airport users with the assistance of the General Aviation Manufacturers Association and the National Business Aircraft Association, responded by seeking relief in the federal courts. AOPA participated as amicus curiae (friend of the court). But one of several nails in Santa Monica Airport's coffin recently was

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY THE AUTHOR

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Restrictions on training activities forced one FBO to cut back on its services. Another resorted to fuel trucks when its pumps were closed.

hammered in when the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a city has the right to impose reasonable noise and activity restrictions on airport users.

Applauding this landmark decision, the City of Santa Monica now intends to reduce the single-event noise-exposure level further, to 85 decibels, a catastrophic imposition because this eliminates the majority of airplanes currently based at SMO. Airport users will have another day in court, however, in an effort to prove that the noise limit of 85 decibels is unreasonable.

Tiring of having to defend its actions in court and enduring "the pesky airport operators [users] and their vested interests," the city has responded with arbitrary and punitive harassment. Examples include the closure of an observation deck for children, the cessation of all commuter flights and a charge that underground fuel tanks suddenly are no longer legal and must be removed. (They have been replaced by fuel trucks.) The city even has issued eviction notices (effective February 1982) to most airport operators (all of those with short-term leases), even though this may be in violation of a federal airport-development grant (discussed later).

The noise issue, however, is but one tip of the iceberg. Another has risen as rapidly as the price of southern California acreage. The airport occupies five percent of the usable land in Santa Monica and is considered one of the most valuable chunks of real estate in the world. A recent independent study indicates that by fully developing the airport's 215 acres, the city's annual total revenue could be doubled.

Economic and environmental argu-

ments alone may seem sufficient justification for a city to close its airport. But in the case of Santa Monica, the city council's motives apparently are much more devious. Investigation behind the scenes reveals an intriguing study in power politics and the existence of a political movement that challenges the American way of life.

During the Santa Monica municipal elections held last April, a slate of ultra-liberal candidates were elected to six of the seven council seats. The issues involved had little to do with the airport, even though the candidates had announced prior to election that they were committed to closing the airport. One candidate even said, "We will recycle the garbage and the airport." The intent was and is to convert valuable airport property, in part, to low-income housing.

The principal issue during the election campaign was rent control. Running as advocates of renters' rights, the liberals rolled to an overwhelming victory in this community where the vast majority of the electorate are apartment dwellers.

The left-wing candidates were and are supported by the Campaign for Economic Democracy (CED), a radical organization founded and led by Tom Hayden, a left-wing agitator and political activist supported by his wife, actress Jane Fonda (both residents of Santa Monica). Those unfamiliar with CED should understand that this political force is dedicated to the destruction of America's traditional economic systems. By seizing upon the fears and uncertainties of the Santa Monica renters, the CED-backed slate took advantage of a sensitive as well as a legitimate grievance (high rent) and turned it into a political advantage.

Although Santa Monica airport was a subordinate issue during the election campaign, the new city council sees the opportunity to use airport property as a conduit for the perpetuation of its political power. By using the 215-acre site for low-cost housing and the development of other social programs, the council could expand its political base by bestowing its beneficence upon the poverty-stricken.

After the city election, Hayden was quoted in the CED organ, *The Economic Democrat*, as saying, "Santa Monica is the first city in the nation to elect a government dedicated to economic democracy."

Hayden's code words, economic democracy, warrant explanation. This is a philosophy located to the left of socialism on the political spectrum. Its stated goal is to eradicate capitalism and spread the wealth so that all corporations and businesses are publicly owned and operated. To learn how such a philosophy could destroy the United States as we know it, it is essential to study one of CED's bibles, *Economic Democracy*, co-authored by Martin Carnoy and Derek Shearer, who just happens to be married to Santa Monica's newly appointed mayor, Ruth Yanatta Goldway. Any student of political science who reads this book will note its remarkable similarity to another, smaller volume entitled *Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*. Both volumes espouse the overthrow of landlords and capitalism, the abrogation of private ownership and free enterprise, ad nauseam. (A former CED member recently pointed out that during Hayden's unsuccessful bid for the U.S. Senate in 1976, much of his campaign literature contained a red star. Political observers in-



A bumper crop of warning signs has replaced the welcome mat for Santa Monica pilots. Even the kid at the airport fence no longer is welcome.

evitably must ask if this symbolizes Hayden's dedication to a Marxist future for the United States.)

After their electoral triumph, the CED-backed city council lost little time getting into action. They appointed as mayor radical activist Ruth Yanatta Goldway who later, and apparently without fear of being charged with nepotism, appointed her husband, Derek Shearer, to the powerful city planning commission.

The council also declared an immediate moratorium on further construction

in the city without regard to previous obligations. Two hardship cases were allowed to proceed with building projects, but only after the builders agreed to "donate" to the city a percentage of the profits. Furthermore, the council decreed, any future condominium or apartment built in Santa Monica—no matter how expensive or luxurious—must have one-third of its occupancy devoted to low-income housing.

During a tape-recorded interview, Mayor Goldway told this writer that, if

Santa Monica had a golf course, she would convert the acreage into a public park. It is this type of attitude and mentality that makes an airport such a likely target. This municipal government regards general aviation as little more than a playground for the wealthy and, therefore, that it deserves recycling into something that is apparently more useful to the underprivileged.

Even if it were conceded that SMO is used directly by only a small segment of the population, does that give a government the right to ride roughshod over the rights of such a minority?

There is a significant lesson to be learned from the behavior of the Santa Monica City Council that is applicable in one way or another to anyone who values having a place from which to take off and land. As long as there is a quest for political power by any governmental unit, those elements least able to defend themselves are potential victims. Some small urban airports are uniquely vulnerable because they do not produce sufficient revenue and do not have a sufficient constituency to wield the necessary political power. In other words, obtain local support for an airport or risk waging a battle against possibly overwhelming political odds.

The users of Santa Monica Airport are fighting such a war and are faced with the reality of defeat. Every weapon levied at the airport users by the city council, however, is quite legal. The consequences, of course, are enormous. Small businesses at SMO are being harassed and evicted out of existence. Thousands who depend upon the airport in one way or another will suffer. Interstate commerce will be affected. Even Santa Mon-



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ica's police chief is looking for a spot at Los Angeles International Airport to base the police department's Cessna 172. Nevertheless, it is all legal, and therein lies the rub; for what is legal is not always beneficial for society.

It appears that the short-term survival of the airport hinges on a contract between the Federal Aviation Administration and the City of Santa Monica. In 1968, the city entered into an agreement stipulating that it would allow land specified in the airport master plan to be used to provide aviation-related services such as fixed-base operations, maintenance and fuel. This airport-development grant, however, expires in 1988. As of this writing, the FAA has not publicly responded to the city's undeniable attempt to breach its contract with the federal government. According to DeWitte Lawson, the FAA's counsel for the Western Region, "The [FAA] currently is reviewing its position to see if it will take any action." This apparent lethargy in protecting public rights may signal the FAA's reluctance to embark upon a lengthy legal battle that, even if successful, would extend the availability of airport services only until the contract expires in seven years.

But even seven years of airport life is worth preserving. There will be three more municipal elections during that period, and there is a possibility that the electorate will become disenchanted with CED's radicalism and vote for a new city council, one that might be more appreciative of the city airport.

According to legal opinion, the city is required to maintain at least a runway, a skeleton airport, until 2015. This is when the last of the FAA's leases—for operations that include a control tower, a vortac transmitter and VASI (visual approach slope indicator) lights—expires. The city recognizes these obligations, but envisions allowing only severely

curtailed operations until the leases expire. The city will continue to fight a war of attrition to strangle the life out of SMO. According to this popular scenario, the diminished traffic count then would compel the FAA (for economic reasons) to withdraw from its leases (with municipal concurrence, of course). That is when the bulldozers would strip away the remnants of what was once the world's busiest single-runway airport.

There are two other possibilities for breathing new life into Santa Monica Airport. The first involves a soon-to-be structured Regional Airport Authority, recently approved by the four counties in the Los Angeles basin. Using the principle of eminent domain, such an organization might have the power to remove the airport from municipal control.

Another straw possibly worth grasping could turn out to be the final straw. Not long ago, a scientific poll determined that two-thirds of those who live in Santa Monica are in favor of retaining a city airport. Based on this, several airport operators feel that using the initiative and referendum process, the ultimate fate of the airport should be placed on a ballot and decided by the voters. Deane Funk, publisher of Santa Monica's newspaper, *The Evening Outlook*, thinks that SMO probably would survive such a vote.

Consider, however, that the airport popularity poll was taken without offering a CED-backed council an opportunity to propagandize its opposition.

The late, respected American author, William Saroyan, once wrote his own obituary in which he said, although he conceded that everyone must die, perhaps he would be an exception.

This philosophy of rejecting the inevitable somehow seems appropriate in the case of Santa Monica Airport. Although it may appear that the death knell is sounding, the airport is still breathing. And where there is life, there is hope. ◻



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