



BY BARRY SCHIFF

Another nail in the coffin

Is Santa Monica the next Meigs?

THIRTY-TWO YEARS AGO I wrote a feature article titled, “Death of an Airport” (August 1981 *AOPA Pilot*). It described how the city council of Santa Monica, California, had been conducting a war of attrition against aviation users in an unveiled attempt to close one of the oldest airports in the country.

Steeped in history and aeronautical lore, the Santa Monica Municipal Airport (SMO) was where four Douglas World Cruisers began the first flight around the world. It is where the first Powder Puff Derby originated and where tie-down spaces were once reserved for the likes of Howard Hughes, Amelia Earhart, and Wiley Post. SMO had been home to the Douglas Aircraft Company, and Runway 21 launched almost all of Douglas’ propeller-driven DC transports on their maiden flights. Santa Monica had once been the busiest single-runway airport in the world and played a key role in the aviation infrastructure of the Los Angeles Basin.

None of this, however, prevented an onslaught of municipal abuse and harassment against airport users. The politically progressive city council was an extension of the Campaign for Economic Democracy, a political movement dedicated to the destruction of America’s traditional economic systems. It was a philosophy left of socialism on the political spectrum, and its declared goal was to eradicate capitalism and spread the wealth throughout an egalitarian society. The city’s mayor at that time said that low-income housing represented the best use for the 215 acres of airport land. Sound familiar? Not much has changed since.

A group of airport users and activists formed the Santa Monica Airport Association. Its members made great personal sacrifices and applied tenacious dedication to fighting city hall. Finally, and with FAA assistance, the city council begrudgingly agreed to keep the airport open until 2015. Breathing a sigh of relief, we believed that we had won the war. We know now that we had won only a battle. The city has recently restated its objective to close the airport and has begun waging another assault in this decades-long war against SMO (see “Road Warrior,” August 2013 *AOPA Pilot*).

Using creative accounting, the city claims that the airport is a financial drain—this is demonstrably untrue—and intends to make up for the so-called shortfall by instituting punitive landing fees. The new fee structure is to be implemented August 1 but has been widely mischaracterized as simply an increase in

landing fees (from \$2.07 per thousand pounds of maximum gross weight to \$5.48). These fees now will apply also to aircraft based at the airport, including those used for flight training—which is unprecedented. (The beneficent city council might waive landing fees for medical flights, but this has yet to be determined.)

An hour’s worth of touch-and-go landings in a Cessna 172 will result in a student pilot contributing more than a hundred bucks to city coffers. Clearly this would put flight schools out of business—which, of course, is an intended consequence. Those barely able to afford owning an airplane at SMO will be forced to sell or move their airplanes. Transient pilots will be discouraged from visiting and take their business elsewhere. The truth is that the city hopes that these landing fees will curtail operations such that its attempt to close the airport in two years (or severely limit its use by reducing runway length) will meet with less resistance. Ironically, these landing fees will reduce municipal income because of the resulting loss of business and flight activity. The city will compensate by raising fees even further. The power to tax is the power to destroy.

Other U.S. airports are awaiting the outcome of the battle being fought at Santa Monica. If this city can get away with instituting such Draconian fees, other airport managers will become encouraged to enact similar measures. Landing fees will metastasize to airports all over the country in a way that could be a death knell to general aviation. Look at Europe and the dampening effect that landing fees there have had on lightplane flying.

Although AOPA and other organizations are mounting strong efforts to overturn Santa Monica’s new ordinance, I am concerned about an apparent lack of outrage from pilots individually. Many with whom I have discussed this threat simply shrug with an attitude of helpless resignation that flying is simply and irreversibly becoming too expensive. My theory about this attitude, however, is that it results from what happens to people when government (federal or municipal) repeatedly tramples upon their rights. They feel beaten. Remember Meigs Field? If we cherish the freedom provided by airports from which we can reach for the sky, it is imperative that we remain energized and resistant. Paraphrasing Thomas Jefferson, government must fear the people for liberty to survive.

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