

CRAIG FIELD

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Too risky

The proposal to extend a runway at Craig Field sounds too good to be true. *Maybe it is.*

Jacksonville Airport Authority officials say they understand why neighbors might initially be upset about their proposal to increase the length of a 4,000 yard runway by 50 percent.

Craig, located at Atlantic Boulevard and St. Johns Bluff Road, is in a highly populated and rapidly growing residential area.

There have been noise complaints in the past, and critics fear a longer runway would exacerbate the problem by inviting more landings and larger aircraft.

The JAA makes three basic points, which sound compelling on the surface:

- It could improve safety. A longer runway would give pilots more time to adjust, making crashes less likely.
- There would be less noise, not more, because pilots could pass over homes at a higher altitude.
- It would attract more corporate jets, which would be good for the economy.

Those arguments don't quite sound right, however.

Craig doesn't have an extensive history of crashes caused by a short runway, and the JAA hasn't heard any noise complaints this year. This may be an attempt to solve problems that don't exist.

Also, corporate jets do not need to use Craig; there already are long runways at Cecil Field and Jacksonville International Airport.

Of course, they *want* to use it. Craig is located just a short distance from both downtown and the beaches.

But air travelers still need a car to get either place, just like they would if they had landed at JIA or Cecil.

Is it worth perhaps disturbing families inside homes just to make the beaches more convenient for corporate air travelers?

For the sake of argument, assume

the JAA is right: higher-flying planes would emit less audible noise, new jets are quieter than old props and thin pavement would preclude heavier, noisier jets from Craig.

Still, the JAA concedes that a longer runway would attract jets that now avoid Craig for safety reasons.

Additional takeoffs mean noise is heard more frequently.

Even a small amount of clatter might become annoying if heard often enough.

At one time, noise complaints were more common than today. Why?

One explanation is that National Guard helicopters used to operate out of Craig Field. Choppers move slowly and make a lot of noise.

After the Guard left, maybe it was quieter.

Or perhaps flying patterns have changed or people simply became accustomed to the noise.

Regardless of the reason, why risk sparking new complaints by luring more planes to the airfield when there already are adequate runways in less-populated areas of the city?

The JAA argues that more air traffic will be coming to Craig regardless whether the runway is lengthened. There are about 165,000 operations a year, and it's just a matter of time before capacity is reached — 210,000.

Then maybe pilots should be encouraged to use other, less crowded airfields.

If the city planned for Craig to be a hub, it should have begun buying land around it — as a noise buffer zone — decades ago.

It did not. To the contrary, it promised in a comprehensive plan many years ago not to extend the runway.

Since then, untold thousands of homes have been built in the area.

There are reasons to extend the runway but none so compelling as to justify breaking a promise that may have led thousands of people to invest their life savings in nearby homes.