



PHOTO: JO LEWIS

Battle of biblical proportions rages over Whenuapai skies

The fight for Whenuapai is shaping up to be an aerial battle of David and Goliath. JO LEWIS, SHARON MARRIS and SUDESH KISSUN investigate.

In one corner is the Waitakere City Council with a high profile mayor, a well oiled public relations machine and money to spend in its push to turn Whenuapai military airbase into a commercial airport.

In the other corner is a group of residents who have come together for a common cause — to oppose the council's plan.

Whenuapai was developed as an air force base in 1938 but began hosting civilian flights in 1945 and remained Auckland's premier airport until 1965, when Auckland Airport opened.

The base consists of 311 hectares located in Brigham's Basin. It has three runways but only one is serviceable for commercial flights.

The airbase has the capacity for 200,000 aircraft movements a year, but it is currently only operating at about 5% of this.

The land is owned by the Government but is within the jurisdiction of the Waitakere City Council.

On December 9, 2002, the Government decided to downsize the New Zealand Defence Force operations at Whenuapai and consolidate Royal New Zealand Airforce activities at Ohakea. Military use of the airport is intended to continue until at least 2007 with a staged withdrawal over the next five years.

The New Zealand Defence Force has put forward four options for the future development of the Whenuapai Airbase. They include development of a commercial airport, public work/urban development, industrial/commercial uses and a rural/residential development.

Minister of Defence Mark Burton is required to recommend the most logical use for Whenuapai and the process of disposal of the airbase by the end of June.

Whenuapai Airbase Action Group chairperson Ann Forrester admits the group is dwarfed by the council's resources and power but members are, nevertheless, finding their own ways to support their cause.

"Sometimes I see it as a battle of David and Goliath," she says. "The mayor manages to get

himself on the front pages of our local papers every week.

"I also feel that we are not afforded the right amount of space by the media to air our views."

The council has put up billboards in the Waitakere region and distributed pamphlets to households in a bid to gain support for the commercial airport plan.

A mayoral taskforce committee has also been set up to lobby residents, businesses and government officials.

Mrs Forrester says her group is not against commercial airports but feels that the idea of a commercial airport at Whenuapai has not been properly evaluated.

According to her, the council has ignored the environmental impact a commercial airport will have on the community of Waitakere.

"The council has not carried out any environmental impact assessment.

"They are trying to gloss over the noise impact by saying a jet makes the same noise as a vacuum cleaner."

Mrs Forrester says that planes using the airport at Mangere fly over 10km of water during landing and takeoff but this would not be the case at Whenuapai. Residents of Browns Bay, Hobsonville and Whenuapai will all be on the flight path of planes using the proposed commercial airport.

In a letter to Waitakere residents, mayoral taskforce chairman Bryan Mogridge urged the community not to be put off by "these nimby (not in my backyard) types who live in the vicinity".

The Air Force departure will cause an economic loss of \$230 million to Waitakere City, according to the council.

"They are trying to gloss over the noise impact by saying a jet makes the same noise as a vacuum cleaner."

Mr Mogridge says 1650 jobs will go and 826 families associated with the airbase will leave the area.

"This sort of loss anywhere should trigger significant concern," he says.

"Within a young city such as Waitakere it represents a major setback.

"The loss must be reduced by ensuring that the airbase is replaced with other sources of economic stimulation."

According to Mr Mogridge, adding houses to the Whenuapai site would do nothing for Waitakere.

He says the benefits of having an airport at Whenuapai include coping with the influx of passengers and cargo traffic as Auckland city grows, developing infrastructure and business around the area and reducing travelling times to and from Auckland Airport.

The council says no public funds will be needed to develop the airport as Infratil, a company specialising in infrastructure and utility assets, will provide the capital.

The council's plan has the backing of the local iwi group Te Kawerau a Maki and Enterprise Waitakere which represents business interests in the region.

Te Kawerau a Maki is the mana whenua of Waitakere City and their forefathers have

lived in the area for over a thousand years.

In the submission to the NZ Defence Force, Te Kawerau a Maki chairman, Te Warena Taua, says a commercial airport will bring employment opportunities for Maori in Whenuapai.

The iwi are concerned about the storm water and sewerage issues that will accompany the intense urbanisation being proposed by Housing New Zealand.

"The airbase borders the upper reaches of the Waitemata Harbour, a traditional food basket for iwi," he says.

Housing New Zealand is seeking further land at Hobsonville as the New Zealand Defence Force releases more land. They announced last year that 30.5 hectares of land and defence housing has already been transferred for "state housing purposes".

Housing New Zealand describes acquiring Whenuapai airbase as a "unique opportunity" to achieve significant economic and housing benefits for the Waitakere region.

At the time of the Te Kawerau a Maki submission there had been no formal contact between the Government and iwi about Whenuapai.

The airport proposal has been opposed by Auckland International Airports Ltd.

In their submission to the Chief of Defence Force in January this year, AIAL says that an airport at Whenuapai would have an adverse effect on the community in terms of noise, traffic and other environmental issues.

"Back in 1948, the use of Whenuapai as an airport was rejected on the basis that its runways were not long enough, and could not be extended without major cost," the company said.

"The site was also burdened with approach and circuit obstructions, and limits to its usability due to meteorological factors such as wind, fog, low cloud and heavy rain."

Auckland Airport also claims the present airport at Mangere is equipped to deal with demand for the foreseeable future as it has permission to build a second runway.

Traffic through the airport is increasing. The week ending January 11, was the busiest on record: 140,950 international passengers were processed (the previous record, at a similar time in 2003, was 125,188 passengers.)

The chief executive of AIAL, Don Huse, said that despite the numbers, the airport was well able to handle them.

"We have had almost no issues arise directly from the unprecedented passenger numbers."

John Key, National MP for Helensville, agrees that Auckland airport is coping with arrivals.

"Auckland airport has the capacity to operate 24 hours, is building a second runway, and accommodates large commercial activities linked to its significant flight traffic and freight and maintenance operations," he says.

"In contrast, at Whenuapai freight is a non-starter given it has a curfew at night and cannot



PHOTO: GEMMA FINLAY

handle international commercial jets."

The United Future Party is cautious about the airport plans but happy to lend its support to anything that will ease the city's traffic woes.

United Future MP Bernie Ogilvy says: "Any measure which will cut traffic cutting through the city to access Mangere must be worth investigating."

His colleague Paul Adams says: "With the traffic problems Auckland faces...a second airport serving the northern area of Auckland all the way up to Northland makes good sense."

Mr Key disputes this: "No one will want to fly into Mangere from Wellington or Christchurch and then take a cab ride to Whenuapai in order to fly to the Bay of Islands. This begs the question: Who or what would fly out of Whenuapai?"

Should the airport go ahead, an answer to the transport question between the two airports could be found by following the Sydney example where there is a quick, efficient train service to transport people between the two terminals and the city.

Sydney's residents have also had recent debates on the viability of a second airport. In August last year Prime Minister John Howard finally diffused speculation when he told the *Melbourne Age* that the idea was not on.

Other submissions have since been made to the New Zealand Defence Force on future options for the use of Whenuapai Airbase. When submissions closed on January 16, 2257 submissions from the public and other interest groups had been received.

Defence Force director of property rationalisation Peter Bollman says the public submissions received reflect the high level of interest in this issue shown by the community.

"Clearly there has been considerable community and individual interest in the future use of the air base and people who believe they are going to be affected want to be able to influence the decision making process," says Mr Bollman.

WAAG chairperson Mrs Forrester says the group is confident that Whenuapai will not be turned into a commercial airport.

All eyes will move towards Mr Burton as he announces the future of Whenuapai.

Approval for the airport will mean a win for the mighty Waitakere City Council and its allies.

Anything else will mean a small group of Whenuapai residents have emulated David and won the battle.



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