

Private jets rattling folks in Santa Monica

A surge in private jet use by celebrities and "power players" is irking residents who arrived in quieter times.

By Rebecca Cathcart, New York Times

Last update: December 01, 2007 – 11:43 PM

SANTA MONICA, CALIF. - Virginia Ernst sat on her living room couch, her face turned toward the ceiling. The high-pitch grind of a jet engine split the air about 100 feet above her home.

"That's a Challenger," said Margaret Williamson. "No," Ernst replied, "it's a Citation. It reminds me of a dentist's drill."

The Challenger and the Citation are popular lines of corporate jets. The Citation is louder, explained Ernst, in her mid-60s, but the Challenger is bigger and shakes her house's windows and walls. Either way, the planes, besides leaving behind noxious fumes, are not what you want to be living under if you value peace and quiet.

Since the 1960s, both Ernst and Williamson have resided beneath the flight path of planes arriving at Santa Monica Airport, one of the oldest general aviation airports in the country and among those closest to residential neighborhoods. Ernst's house is 300 feet from the only runway, Williamson's is 50 feet closer, and the prospects for an early subsiding of the noise seem dim. **Jet traffic there has almost doubled since 1999, to 19,000 takeoffs and landings so far this year, says the airport's manager, Bob Trimborn, even as traffic of small piston-driven planes has declined.**

The rise in private-jet travel is being driven in part by long check-in and security lines at major airports. Those waits make private flying attractive to wealthy travelers, while at the same time fractional-jet-ownership companies are making it possible for more corporations to send their executives off in style. The developments have stoked the anger of Santa Monica residents, who say jet fumes endanger their health and noise threatens their sanity.

"You've got the celebrities, you've got the power players here," said Bill Rosendahl, a city council member in neighboring Los Angeles. "Frankly, I say to the super-rich, go to another airport," because "this is an environmental issue that affects real people."

The 227-acre airport was built in 1919, when the land for miles around was largely open fields. But with the 1921 opening of the Douglas Aircraft Co. in Santa Monica and then the end of World War II and the Korean War, a residential building boom swept the area, spurred by demand from Douglas employees and returning military pilots.