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SOAR News Briefs
Special Edition: IDOT Public Hearing on Heliport Proposal

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SOAR Asks for Safety First

The Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) held a four-day public hearing in Streeterville from July 22-25 to get the data, facts, and evidence surrounding the rooftop heliport proposed by Children's Memorial Hospital (CMH) into the public record for consideration.

IDOT indicated at the hearing that it has not made a decision as to whether it will approve or deny CMH's heliport application. IDOT stated that it would likely be many months before any decision is reached.

CMH presented testimony the first day of the hearing, followed by SOAR's testimony on the second day. Formal presentations were followed by public comment on the third and fourth days.

Throughout the testimony presented by SOAR and its experts, emphasis was placed on putting "safety first" for everyone.

The following is a summary of SOAR's presentation on July 23rd.

SOAR Warmly Welcomed Children's Memorial Hospital to Streeterville - Gail Spreen

SOAR's testimony began with comments from SOAR's President Gail Spreen. Ms. Spreen spoke about the densely populated, vertical nature of Streeterville and the work that SOAR does on behalf of Streeterville residents to ensure continued appropriate balance of mixed-uses. She reiterated SOAR's deep respect for the mission and good work of Children's Memorial Hospital (CMH) and warmly welcomed CMH to the community.

Ms. Spreen noted that SOAR's work on the heliport proposal was driven by resident concerns about safety raised to SOAR and CMH. These safety concerns propelled SOAR to seek outside, independent review of the heliport proposal by highly qualified experts.

Ms. Spreen concluded her remarks by respectfully requesting that IDOT deny CMH's rooftop heliport proposal. She also encouraged CMH instead to carefully review and utilize the alternative heliport location suggested by Alderman Brendan Reilly just south of Navy Pier.

No Safety Analysis or Risk Analysis - Dr. Patrick Veillette

Dr. Veillette, a distinguished aviation safety expert and author, former accident investigator for the US Air Force, and former medical helicopter pilot stated that CMH's proposal lacked a comprehensive safety analysis or risk analysis. This critical analysis includes four steps: 1) list the hazards, 2) conduct a failure mode and effects analysis to identify the frequency, criticality and severity of the risks, 3) determine strategies to control the risks and 4) make a go/no-go decision on the proposal.

Dr. Veillette discussed basic hazards that were never addressed by CMH's proposal including no study of available escape routes, no suitable emergency landing areas, the wind conditions along the proposed flight paths prime for loss of control of the aircraft, the inadequacy of the Super AWOS and the human factors that influence a pilot's decision process.

Dr. Veillette highlighted that a host of factors would need to be factored into any calculation of potential safe utilization of the heliport including wind at the heliport, wind along the flight paths, the effect of wind on the helicopter, visibility, cloud ceiling, precipitation, turbulence, weather, etc. The only factor considered by the hospital's experts was wind at the heliport.

Dr. Veillette concluded that the terrain, work load, wind conditions, distractions, lack of escape routes and emergency landing sites make it highly unlikely that the proposed heliport site could ever be safe, and recommended that the alternative heliport location be investigated.

Alternative Heliport Site Poses No Significant Risk to Patients - Dr. Bryan Bledsoe

Dr. Bledsoe, a board certified emergency physician, recipient of the 2008 American College of Emergency Physicians "Hero of Emergency Medicine Award", and medical helicopter safety expert who recently testified at the NTSB hearings stated, "recent studies have begun to demonstrate that few patients actually benefit from medical helicopter transport, even during most emergencies."

Dr. Bledsoe testified that the conclusions CMH reached on use of an off-site heliport are unsupported by medical authorities and that CMH's presentation failed to use a scientific approach to determine true impact on medical outcomes with the use of the proposed off-site alternative.

Dr. Bledsoe stated that medical regulations require patients to be stabilized prior to inter-facility (i.e., hospital to hospital) transport. He indicated that the increase in time, if any, from use of an off-site heliport location will not impact patient outcomes and that the risk of additional transfers is dramatically overstated by CMH.

Dr. Bledsoe discussed the successful use of off-site heliports in major cities such as New York and Washington D.C. where patients are first flown to off-site heliport locations (e.g., along the river) and are then transported by ground ambulance to the hospital facility.

Dr. Bledsoe concluded that the off-site heliport would pose no significant negative impact to CMH's patients and that the alternative location is far superior.

Wind Tunnel Studies are Seriously Flawed - Dr. Thomas Corke

Dr. Corke, a two time NASA award winner, is the Clark Endowed Chair Professor in Engineering at the University of Notre Dame and the Director of Notre Dame's Institute for Flow Physics and Control and the Director of the Hessert Laboratory for Aerospace Research, which has more than a dozen wind tunnels.

Dr. Corke explained how CMH's wind tunnel study was not adequately performed and analyzed. As a result, the hospital's wind tunnel experts significantly overestimate the heliport's utilization. He showed that the wind tunnel flight path studies were not adequate, were not performed on the final building configuration and overlooked conditions close to the hospital building. In short, that there is no valid data wind tunnel testing for even the two flight paths proposed by CMH.

Dr. Corke stated that it is unlikely that one or even a few rooftop measurements, including those from the proposed Super AWOS, will be sufficient to fully categorize the wind conditions at the hospital or along the flight path. He also noted that if the "utilization" criterion is used as a criterion for "safe flight", then the wind tunnel work done significantly overstates safe flight conditions.

Dr. Corke indicated that lacking an accurate and comprehensive wind tunnel safety study that the application for certification of approval should be denied.

Rooftop Heliport is a High Risk Proposal - Mr. Mark Doub

Mr. Mark Doub, a former aviation accident investigator for the National Transportation Safety Board, former US Navy rotary-wing and fixed wing flight instructor, and naval accident investigator could not be present at the hearing but submitted an affidavit that was read.

Mr. Doub indicated that the FAA's recommendations for hospital heliport site selection were not followed. Specifically, that the proposed site cannot support instrument operations, that the building's design cannot support future expansion, and that the weight-bearing capacity of the heliport documented at 15,000 lbs does not support the takeoff weight of a Blackhawk helicopter used by the military in disaster relief efforts.

Mr. Doub discussed the lack of suitable emergency landing areas, the challenging wind conditions along the flight paths and at the heliport, and the insufficiency of the Super AWOS - as a single data point - to provide adequate information to the pilot. Mr. Doub also discussed the importance of Category A certified aircraft that are required to meet very specific performance standards in the event of an engine failure.

Mr. Doub concluded, "from a public safety standpoint, the Children's Memorial Hospital heliport proposal is a high-risk proposal. As a matter of public safety, the Illinois Department of Transportation must reject Children's Memorial Hospital's application."

IDOT Asked to Deny Rooftop Heliport Application - Patty Frost

Co-Chair of SOAR's Campus Task Force, Patty Frost stated that CMH is looking to put a public safety hazard where one does not currently exist and that CMH has a responsibility to demonstrate the safety of its proposal to the community. She indicated that CMH has failed that responsibility and that there is expert evidence to the contrary.

Ms. Frost stated that there are more than 19,000 residential units in Streeterville with ~2,000 residential units under construction and another 2,800+ units approved. She indicated that there are 91 existing buildings within 5,000 feet of the proposed heliport that are 400+ feet tall, and that the institutions alone expect an employee base of more than 25,000 employees in Streeterville by 2012.

Ms. Frost highlighted that Northwestern Memorial Hospital abandoned a proposal to construct a rooftop heliport atop Olson Pavilion in 1986. She discussed SOAR's meeting with the FAA in which SOAR learned just how limited the FAA's review of CMH's proposal truly was. For example, the FAA did not document or evaluate the public safety risks of CMH's proposal.

Ms. Frost presented data showing that 2008 was the deadliest year for medical helicopter operations and that five of the thirteen accidents last year involved CMH's flight providers. Four of the thirteen accidents occurred at or within a mile of a hospital heliport.

Ms. Frost concluded by respectfully requesting that IDOT deny CMH's heliport application and encouraged CMH to use the alternative heliport location suggested by Alderman Reilly.

Next Steps

SOAR will continue to keep you informed about the proposed heliport. This safety issue is a priority for SOAR.

As you can see from the above synopsis of the expert testimony from the IDOT public hearing, SOAR has assembled an impressive team of experts who have had a great impact on the process. They have produced objective and fact-based studies that call into question the safety of CMH's proposal.

The retention of experts including legal counsel means that there are bills to pay and that SOAR's fundraising activity for this effort is not over. We gratefully acknowledge everyone who has made a contribution. We also acknowledge that more financial assistance is needed to help with the expenses from the hearing.

If you have already contributed, please consider another donation to help us meet our obligations. If you have not yet supported this effort, please act now.

Donations can be made online or sent via mail to the SOAR office at 244 E. Pearson St., #101, Chicago, IL 60611. Please specify that your donation is for the heliport initiative as donations are being restricted for this purpose.

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