



INADEQUATE AIRPORT CAPACITY: A DEVELOPING TRANSPORTATION CRISIS IN THE GREATER LOS ANGELES REGION

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Introduction

The Greater Los Angeles Region, which includes the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura, plus the urbanized western portions of San Bernardino and Riverside counties, had a 1985 population in excess of 12,000,000 people. Currently America's second-ranking urban region, it is one of the most dynamic urban complexes in the nation, and is currently enjoying rapid population and economic growth. In recent years this growth has depended increasingly on the availability of fast and reliable air transportation, the demand for which is projected to increase dramatically over the next decade. As a result, substantial increases in commercial airport capacity will be necessary by 1995 if a serious capacity crisis is to be avoided.

Although much time and money have been spent by planning officials over the past two decades in seeking to expand airport capacity in the urban region, little progress has been made. This paper, after examining the existing commercial airport system of the Greater Los Angeles Region in the context of rapidly rising demand for air

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transportation, describes major proposals to expand the system, evaluates them in terms of their economic, environmental, and political viability, and seeks to explain the failure to implement them. In conclusion, we recommend an airport strategy which would provide at least a short-term palliative to the airport capacity crisis within the region.

The Existing System

The current commercial airport system of the Greater Los Angeles Region consists of Los Angeles International (LAX), Ontario International (ONT), Burbank-Glendale-Pasadena (BUR), Long Beach Municipal (LGB), and John Wayne (SNA) airports. Farther afield, but still within the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) region, are facilities at Palmdale, Palm Springs, Blythe, and Imperial County (Figure 1). This regional airport system is dominated by Los Angeles International, which has 67 percent of system capacity and handles approximately 80 percent of the system's 42,000,000 annual passengers. Ontario International has 20 percent of the system's capacity, while each of the region's remaining airports has much more modest ability to handle additional passengers.¹

Rising Demand and Its Implications

Demand for air travel has grown rapidly since the early days of commercial air transport in Los Angeles. Recent forecasts of various government agencies indicate that by 1995 systemwide demand may exceed the present capacity of Greater Los Angeles Region airports by anywhere from 25 to 95 percent.² The basic problem facing the region is that the existing and currently planned commercial airport system is inadequate to handle projected 1995 demand. Indeed, projected demand could not be met even if existing airports were to expand to their maximum capacities and a new, 12,000,000 annual passenger airport were built at Palmdale. It could be argued, in fact, that a new

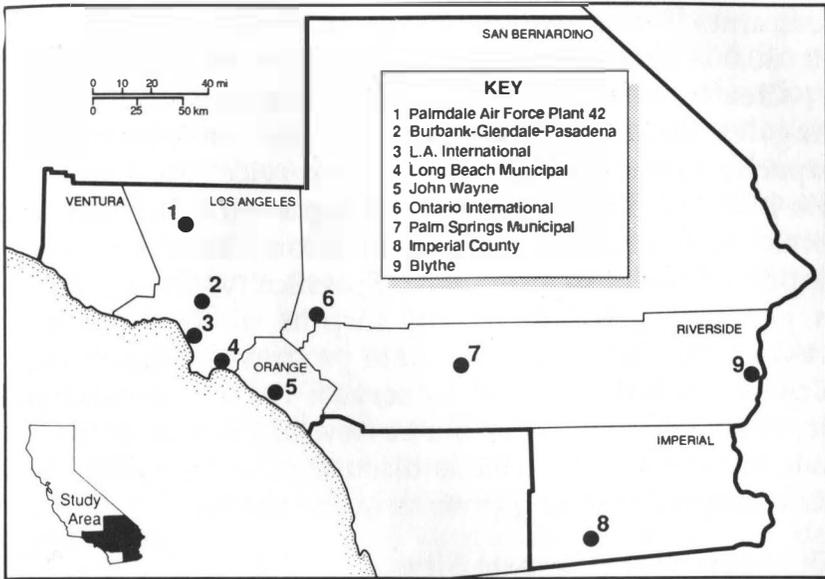


Figure 1. Air-Carrier Airports in the SCAG region.

commercial airport at Palmdale would do little to help the regional airport system to cope with 1995 demand; for the Palmdale site is fully sixty miles by road from downtown Los Angeles, and well over 100 road miles from the rapidly expanding suburban areas of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino counties which can be expected to generate much of the region's increased demand for air travel in 1995 and beyond. Fortunately, Ontario International Airport, located in the heart of Southern California's burgeoning "inland empire," is currently operating at less than half of its 20 percent passenger capacity.³ Thus, through 1995, it should be comparatively easy for this airport to accommodate any increase in passenger traffic from the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario area.

No such simple solution exists for rapidly-growing Orange County, however. In early 1985 its only commercial airport, tiny John Wayne, was constrained by Orange County supervisors to fifty-five daily departures and 4.1 million annual passengers through 1990. These are severe

restraints for a county which is projected to generate 18,000,000 annual passengers as early as the year 2000.⁴

Clearly, a serious gap is developing in the Greater Los Angeles Region between demand for air travel and the capacity of the region's airports to service this demand. At the heart of this problem is a geographical imbalance between demand for air transportation and the supply of airport facilities to provide it. Specifically, Orange County is generating an increasing surplus of demand for air travel while making inadequate progress in supplying the airport capacity needed to service it. This central point provides the context for our review of the search for alternate airport sites as well as discussion of the failure of the air transport planning process in the region.

The Search for Alternate Sites

The search for suitable sites for development of additional airport capacity dates back to the 1960's when the advent of jet transports, with their greater range, capacity, and efficiency, rather suddenly brought air travel within easy reach of the average, middle-income American. This transportation revolution, in combination with the rapid population growth in Southern California during the post World War II era, alerted planners and politicians to the need for substantial increases in airport capacity. As early as 1967, Orange County, recognizing its dependence on the City of Los Angeles for air transportation, ordered development of a master plan of the county's future air transportation needs.

In July of 1968, phase one of this master plan recommended building a major jetport for North American service in Orange County by 1973, when it would be "needed vitally."⁵ Over the long term, the study recommended building a large "intercontinental airport" in the northern reaches of Camp Pendleton (San Diego County) to serve Southern California. A year later, the Orange County Board of Supervisors, choosing from five possible

locations recommended by its planning consultants, proposed the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station (M.C.A.S.) in central Orange County for "continental" airport development.⁶ Meanwhile, anticipating large future population increases in northern Los Angeles County (the Mojave Desert) and the expected advent of supersonic transport, the City of Los Angeles Department of Airports began purchasing 18,000 acres near Palmdale for eventual construction of the "world's largest" intercontinental airport.⁷

In 1970, phase two of the Orange County master plan was presented to the Orange County Supervisors; and, in the same year, the Southern California Association of Governments first became involved in assessment of the long-term commercial aviation needs of metropolitan Los Angeles. Phase two of the Orange County Plan was developed by a different consulting firm and offered different recommendations than phase one. It recommended building a short-haul airport in Bell Canyon in southeastern Orange County, and joint military and civilian use of El Toro M.C.A.S.⁸ These recommendations, like those of phase one, soon fell victim to local opposition to expected increases in traffic, noise, and air pollution in the vicinity of the proposed developments, and to resistance from the Marine Corps to joint use of its facilities at El Toro.⁹ In the midst of the confusion in Orange County, and the rivalry between Orange County and the City of Los Angeles over siting an "international airport," SCAG, apparently sensing a need for broader, more system-oriented studies, hired two consulting firms to do a two-year study for all of Southern California.

It would be unproductive to review in detail the tangle of reports and recommendations of rival consulting firms and political jurisdictions during the late 1960's and early 1970's. It is sufficient to note that many of the proposals had serious weaknesses, all engendered significant opposition, none had sufficient political support to be implemented, and all ended up gathering dust.

Beginning in the late 1970's, the Southern California Association of Governments renewed its search for new airport capacity. SCAG's Aviation Work Program Committee examined thirteen potential sites, ranging from general aviation and military airports to offshore and undeveloped locations (Figure 2). In the initial screening, six of the thirteen sites were eliminated. Camarillo Airport and Point Mugu Naval Air Station in Ventura County were deemed too remote from markets, a problem shared with March Air Force Base and Norton Air Force Base in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. A proposed, man-made Santa Monica Bay site was rejected because of airspace conflicts with Los Angeles International Airport, and a western Riverside County location was disqualified by difficult access and terrain.¹⁰

Detailed evaluation of the remaining seven sites during 1978 and 1979 resulted in the rejection of an additional six sites. All six suffered from some combination of airspace capacity problems, adverse noise impacts, and policy conflicts involving either land use or civilian versus military use of airfields.¹¹ Finally, in February, 1980, the SCAG Executive Committee voted in favor of a man-made island in Los Angeles-Long Beach Harbor as the site for an additional large airport. The choice was based primarily on centrality to the market, airspace availability, and minimization of noise impacts.¹²

The choice of the harbor site was met by intense opposition on the part of residents in the nearby cities of Los Angeles, Long Beach, San Pedro, and Wilmington, as well as by inhabitants of the Palos Verdes Peninsula. At a series of hearings, local residents argued that it was unacceptable for them to bear the adverse environmental impacts of increased air travel by residents of Orange County. Furthermore, they accused SCAG of picking the site which was expected to offend the fewest people and then undertaking studies to justify the selection. As a result of the uproar, SCAG withdrew its support for the proposed

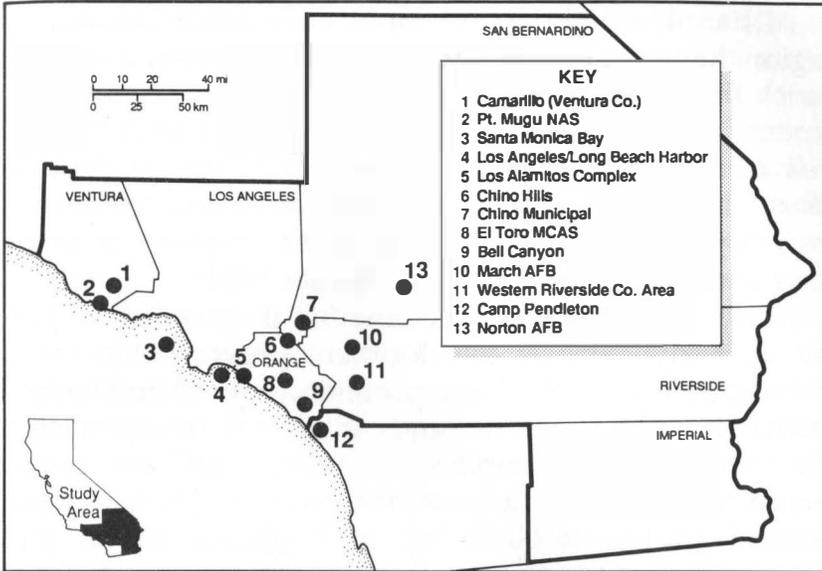


Figure 2. Initial candidate Air-Carrier Airport sites.

“breakwater” airport and ordered a renewed search for a viable location for airport development.¹³

The renewed search identified El Toro Marine Corps Air Station in central Orange County and a site in Camp Pendleton Marine base in northern San Diego County as feasible locations for commercial airport development.¹⁴ Cynics might note that SCAG came to this conclusion in June, 1982, almost exactly fourteen years after the original Orange County master plan, as developed by W. L. Pereira and Associates, had recommended development of civilian airports at these sites.

Failure of the Transportation Planning Process

More than five years have passed since SCAG recommended the El Toro and Camp Pendleton sites. Predictably, no progress has been made toward implementation of the recommendation because of intense opposition by both Orange County and the military to the proposed developments.

All in all, aviation planners of the Greater Los Angeles Region have examined sixteen sites in their twenty-year search for additional airport capacity. Apart from a file of expensive technical reports, however, the metropolitan area has little tangible to show for its very substantial efforts. Meanwhile, the demand for air travel continues to grow rapidly, even though most of the region's major airports exceeded "saturation" in the late 1970's.

What could possibly account for this complete paralysis of a vital airport development program? Our intuitive notion is that the basic problem, a problem shared in California at the regional and state scale in planning for other transportation modes, is that "no one has been in charge." Apparently, no one has been able to take charge because the metropolitan region is fragmented into five counties, over 200 cities, and countless other jurisdictions of one kind or another. Because of this political fragmentation, the people, as well as many of the politicians who reflect the popular will, may have some sense of community at a very local scale, for example, loyalty to Newport Beach, the Palos Verdes Peninsula, or Orange County, but they have very little sense of either community or community responsibility at the larger, regional scale. This disconnection between people and their broader environment may well lie at the root of the apparent breakdown between planning by planners and the implementation of planning by politicians. Though planners may engage in "scientific, objective" analysis and ignore with impunity the "provincial" interests of local communities, local politicians most definitely cannot, at least not without risk to their political futures.

Recommendations

The preceding quasi-philosophical discussion hardly provides a basis for optimism regarding ultimate solution of the regional airport capacity crisis. We are encouraged, though, that the City of Los Angeles and the counties

of Riverside and San Bernardino recently signed a joint powers agreement to establish a regional airport authority.¹⁵ We would urge that Orange County, which refused to join in order to protect its autonomy, reconsider, because it is doubtful that the other jurisdictions will be prepared to bear the increasing burden of Orange County's air travel requirements. Even if they were, freeway congestion levels projected for 1995 might well make continued reliance of Orange County residents on airports thirty or forty miles distant impractical.

We believe that a new, appropriately-located airport, preferably in the southern part of the metropolitan region, offers the only satisfactory solution to the airport problem. The best of the sites in this general area is the Marine Corps Air Station at El Toro. It is centrally located in its market area; many of the facilities needed by a large, commercial airport are already in place; its airspace is adequate; and it lacks the technical liabilities of other sites. In our view the time has come for Orange County to join the rest of the metropolitan region in pushing for conversion of El Toro from military to civilian use.



NOTES

1. Southern California Association of Governments, "Southern California Aviation System: Supplemental Technical Report," Los Angeles, 1982.
2. Personal interview with Cary Greene, Transportation Planner, Southern California Association of Governments, January 20, 1985; Arthur D. Little, Inc., "Palmdale International Airport Final Environmental Impact Statement," Vol. 2 (January, 1978), pp. 16-17; personal interview with Ellis A. Ohnstad, Airport Planning Officer, Federal Aviation Administration, Los Angeles, March 20, 1984; Southern California Association of Governments, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
3. Southern California Association of Governments, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

4. Jeffrey Perlman and Kim Murphy, "John Wayne Airport Plan OK'd," *Los Angeles Times*, Part I (January 31, 1985), p. 3.
5. Don Smith, "Five Locations Suggested for Orange County Airport," *Los Angeles Times* [Orange County Edition] (July 9, 1968), Part 2, p. 1.
5. Glenn Hatfield, "Pereira Favors Pendleton Site," *The Register* [Santa Ana] (July 9, 1968), p. B-1.
7. Los Angeles Department of Airports, "Los Angeles Department of Airports 50th Anniversary," Los Angeles, 1978, p. 15.
8. John Blackburn, "Everyone Clamors for New O C Jetport . . . Someplace Else," *The Register* [Santa Ana] (October 28, 1970), p. A-3.
9. "County Airport Panel Nixes Parsons Report on 3 Sites," *The Register* [Santa Ana] (December 16, 1970), p. D-1.
10. Southern California Association of Governments, "Southern California Aviation System Study: Technical Report," Los Angeles, 1980, pp. III-12.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. III-17, and III-32.
12. Ray Hebert, "Offshore Airport 3 Miles from Harbor Proposed," *Los Angeles Times*, Part II (February 28, 1980), p. 1; Southern California Association of Governments, "Southern California Aviation System Study: Draft Environmental Impact Report for Draft Regional Transportation Plan Amendment: Aviation Element," Los Angeles, 1980, pp. IV-10, and IV-17.
13. Steve Emmons, "Airport Plans for Man-Made Airport Rejected," *Los Angeles Times*, Part II (September 3, 1982), p. 1.
14. Southern California Association of Governments, "Southern California Aviation System Study: Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Report," Los Angeles, 1982, p. 9.
15. Cary Greene interview, *op. cit.*; Noel Swann, "Search for Regional Airport Awaits New Group," *Long Beach Press-Telegram* (October 22, 1983), p. A-3.