

Waiheke chopper concerns land in parliament

The local board and lobby group Quiet Sky Waiheke say a new bill aimed at improving air traffic safety, security and regulation fails to consider the effects of helicopter flights on the environment, climate change and communities such as Waiheke, where the number of consented helipads is sky high.

Quiet Sky Waiheke flew into Wellington virtually this week, lobbying the government to tighten up helicopter controls under the new Civil Aviation Bill.

The draft bill, which is progressing through parliament, and which had its first reading on 29 September last year, will repeal and replace the Civil Aviation Act 1990 and the Airport Authorities Act 1966 with a single, modern statute that should provide a platform for safety, security, and economic regulation of civil aviation. But lobby group Quiet Sky Waiheke, backed by Waitemata and Gulf Ward Councillor Pippa Coom, and the Waiheke and Aotea Great Barrier local boards, say the bill in its current format fails on several accounts.

First, they say the proposed bill doesn't address the effects of helicopter emissions on climate change.

Second, that it does not provide for adequate regulatory control of helicopter activities, and third, that as it is written, the bill reduces the potential for the design-



Quiet Sky Waiheke says the new Civil Aviation Bill fails to enable the Minister of Transport to take actions to address emissions from the growing use of helicopters as a means of non-essential transport and the consequent impact on climate change. Photo Unsplash

nation of a special use airspace to help regulate and control chopper movements.

On Monday, Quiet Sky Waiheke representative Kim Whitaker spoke to the select committee and addressed Greg O'Connor, the chairperson of the Transport and Infrastructure Committee, sharing background on Waiheke's "proliferation" of helicopters and expressing concern that the new bill inadequately addresses significant changes in the country's helicopter sector.

"Thirty years ago, there were about 400 civilian helicopters registered; today, there are over double that number," said Whitaker.

"Even more significantly, in the 70s and 80s, most were operating in remote

low-population areas for deer hunting and agricultural purposes.

"Today an unprecedented and growing number are being used for non-essential travel in high population areas as well for heli-tourism in environmentally sensitive areas. This bill does not appear to have responded at all to these changes. In fact, the words helicopter, helipad or heliport do not even appear once."

The Quiet Sky representative said he and many others are concerned that the bill doesn't contain any measures to address the impact of domestic aviation emissions, particularly for non-essential helicopter travel.

"The bill fails to enable the Minister of

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Transport to take actions to address the emissions from domestic aviation and, in particular, the emissions resulting from the growing use of helicopters as a means of non-essential transport and the consequent impact on climate change."

Quiet Sky Waiheke also expressed concern that the bill, as it's currently written, has no provisions enabling the Minister or the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) to have adequate regulatory control over the location of helipads and the monitoring and regulation of their operation.

"We feel that the approval and operation of helipads should be covered in the bill and provisions made for the close involvement of CAA in the siting, registration, regulation and the monitoring of all helipads," said Whitaker.

"Given the existing excessive concentration of helipads on Waiheke, we further believe that the bill should have provisions that allow for registration and review of all existing helipads with regard to their appropriateness in terms of safety, environmental and amenity impact."

Whitaker was also concerned that the current helipad approval process is undertaken solely by Auckland Council planners "who have no aviation safety and operation experience or knowledge".

"Although the helipads have conditions attached to their consents, since there is no official monitoring of aircraft movements, these conditions are frequently ignored."

In its current form, Whitaker noted that the bill provides no provisions for regulating or monitoring the rapid proliferation of helipads and helicopter movements close to residential areas on Waiheke and elsewhere.

"The resulting implications for the safety of both pilots, passengers and people on the ground are clear and need to be addressed," he said, referencing a CAA briefing to the Minister of Transport in 2020, which identified helicopter safety as requiring a critical focus due to a higher accident rate than in other aviation sectors.

Whitaker and Waiheke Local Board chairperson Cath Handley also raised concerns about the ability of the Minister of Transport to designate a special-use airspace under the new bill.

In August last year, the lobby group filed a comprehensive, local-board-endorsed application for a special-use airspace with the Civil Aviation Authority.

A special-use airspace can be put in place to enhance safety or security within the civil aviation system, for national security purposes, or any other reason in the public interest under the existing Civil Aviation Act (1990).

However, the new bill omits the public interest test and instead says that the minister has the power to make a special

airspace for the purpose of "regulating people, activities, and things in relation to the safety and security of civil aviation or any other effect or potential effect on civil aviation".

Quiet Sky Waiheke and the local board say this is too general.

"The public interest language should be kept because a special use airspace is an essential tool for situations where aviation is causing impacts on the general public," said Whitaker. "An example is the intense, excessive and unregulated helicopter traffic over Waiheke Island."

Meanwhile, Central Auckland MP Chloe Swarbrick, who also spoke at the select committee meeting, says it was disappointing to see the removal of public interest test in the draft bill. "This is like shutting the door on an opportunity for the community to push back on something. I believe the public-interest option needs to be reinstated and I would say that the restoration of the public-interest test is really low hanging fruit. I would be surprised if it isn't put back in."

"My hope is that it's reinstated at the select committee stage as well as other measures and protections around the environment and climate change."

Following the submissions this week, the select committee will develop a report consisting of the reprinted bill, with any amendments and commentary, explaining its recommendations before the bill goes to its second reading later this year.

Meanwhile Swarbrick says immediate action is also under way, with a discussion between the Civil Aviation Authority, the Waiheke Local Board, Quiet Sky Waiheke and others planned this quarter.

"A lot of current helipad permits or consents are being abused in terms of their scope, and in the immediate term I

Great Barrier board supports Quiet Sky submission

The Aotea Great Barrier local board is also weighing in on the chopper conversation, with chairperson Izzy Fordham saying she has seen a substantial increase in resource consent applications for private helipads on Aotea Great Barrier Island over the past 12 months.

In a letter supporting Quiet Sky Waiheke's submission on the new Civil Aviation Bill, Fordham says the increased number of helipads on Aotea has led to a number of concerns regarding aviation safety, noise pollution, social inequity and carbon emissions.

"Some addresses here have multiple helipads, which are concentrated along the same roads, and sited close to the island's main airfield."

Fordham says current Hauraki Gulf Islands District Plan rules allow for the "unregulated and unmonitored growth of helicopter movements without consideration of the impacts".

"We support Quiet Sky Waiheke's recommendations for improved aviation safety, environmental, and amenity considerations. It is essential that all helipad consents require Civil Aviation Authority approval to ensure our airspace is monitored and safe." •

think its best to get everyone around the table to talk about how the CAA can use their powers under the current legislation to do more to improve the situation for Waiheke." • *Sophie Boladeras*



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