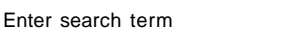


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Airport's neighbors uneasy

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By Hillary Chabot

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Fitchburg Municipal Airport neighbor Butch Buduo is having nightmares lately.

Buduo, 55, said he's had nightmares of a plane crashing into his 132 Crawford St. home ever since a single-engine experimental plane slammed into a building on Monarch Street in Leominster Tuesday afternoon.

His home is located just feet away from Fitchburg Municipal Airport.

"Would I like to move? Yeah. Can I afford it? No. Do I have bad dreams? Yes," Buduo said. "Lately there's just been too many of them."

Buduo's fiance, Crystal Bernier, is sometimes startled awake after violent dreams of plane crashes.

"Sometimes I think they're actually going to hit the house," she said. "They're just dreams about planes crashing. It's not so much me being in the plane, but just actually seeing the event."

The airport is located in Fitchburg but is bordered on three sides by Leominster neighborhoods.

A history of crashes

There have been seven crashes -- six of which involved fatalities -- near the airport since October 1997. A number of the crashes have occurred in Leominster.

One plane crashed into Richard and Claire St. Jean's back yard on Beacon Street in 1999 after the pilot had a heart attack.

Although the plane came close to their home, both said they are not concerned about the accidents.

"The trees protect us," said Richard St. Jean. "The accidents with the planes haven't disturbed me."

Another airport neighbor doesn't feel as confident.

Chris Conant, 56, was fast asleep in his Crawford Street home when two planes collided in midair and slammed into the yard behind his house in December 1999. Both pilots died.

"I had the earplugs on, the fan going," Conant said. "My mother-in-law had a key, so she woke me up with a police officer. The Leominster cop said, 'Chris, I want to shake your hand. You're the luckiest man in Leominster.'"

Conant is worried about the frequent crashes and the near misses, which he witnesses occasionally.

"I'm worried about an airplane taking out the house," Conant said. "A couple of times the planes which are landing clip the top of the tree."

Conant also relies on the nearby trees for safety, and said he refuses to clip a 100-foot-tall oak tree in his backyard.

"That's big oakie," Conant said. "He's not going anywhere."

But Conant said he's used to the air traffic, and said he has no plans to move.

"I wouldn't move from here. This is our home. It's where we live," Conant said with a shrug.

Richard St. Jean, who's lived in his house since 1961, said he hasn't had to pay more insurance since the red-and-white-plane nose-dived into his horseshoe pit.

"I don't recall my insurance jumping because of it," he said.

Michelle Studlien, a neighbor of the most recent plane crash, hasn't seen a noticeable spike in her insurance in the 18 years living next to the airport.

"Our house insurance has gone up just a little, but that's probably normal," she said.

Home values

Studlien, who lives at 18 Monarch St. -- just down the road from the most recent plane crash site -- isn't sure if the airport activity has affected house values in recent years because no one in her area has tried to sell their house, she said.

"But with all this stuff happening, who knows?" she said.

Glen Davis, of 12 Monarch St., said he knows property values have gone up more slowly in recent years -- but he believes it's because of the controversial plans to widen Route 12.

"But that's a whole other issue," he said.

The biggest impact most residents notice from living next-door to the airport is the constant noise -- and occasional fear -- of planes taking off and landing nearby.

Bernier said it took her a year to get used to planes passing overhead and vibrating their home on Crawford Street.

"It was kind of unnerving at first, but I'm getting used to it," Bernier said. "Just the sound of the planes when I'm trying to sleep was tough."

Davis said his family is mostly accustomed to the noise, but when they have company over guests often comment on how loud it is.

Shocked by the noise

Conant also described visitors having shocked reactions to the airport noise.

"My sister came here from North Carolina," Conant explained. "She was in the kitchen and a jet passed over -- she ducked down. She didn't know what was going on."

Studlien said living in the neighborhood for years has allowed her family to tune out some of the sound.

"We live with it, but there are many times where the planes ... come so close the whole house shakes."

Scott LeBlanc, 26, who works at the Need-A-Lift Medivan company on Crawford Street, said he's thought several times that a landing plane might crash into the building where he works.

"See that pole? See those treetops?" LeBlanc said, pointing to a telephone pole in the parking lot at his work. "Man, oh, man -- you can see the whites of their eyes sometimes. It's only a matter of time. Someday we might be hit."

LeBlanc jokes that he needs a window in his cubicle so that he can see a plane if one is approaching.

"We look. We go, 'OK, here they come.' We don't run, but we think about it," LeBlanc said.

Buduo said he saw a plane try to land five times in August.

"It passed really close. I thought it was coming for the building. That day I just got ready to run -- just in case," Buduo said.

A chilling reminder

Although many of the residents living near the airport who spoke to the Sentinel & Enterprise said they are used to the air traffic, some said the recent crashes are scary reminders of how dangerous it can.

Lisa Naze of 91 Buttermilk Road, often thinks about the rainy night this past June when James Normandin and his daughter, Kelly, were killed in a plane crash in the woods near her home.

"I think it's always in the backs of peoples' minds -- especially when you see the planes fly through low," Naze said. "Some nights you hear the planes and they sound just like they did that night. It kind of puts your heart in your throat."

Naze, the mother of two small children, said she would feel more at ease if a study was done of Fitchburg Municipal Airport -- especially given post-Sept. 11 security concerns.

The chairman of the Massachusetts Aeronautics Commission launched an investigation Wednesday into why there have been so many crashes at the Fitchburg Municipal Airport.

An informal survey of regional airports conducted by the Sentinel & Enterprise revealed Fitchburg's airport has had twice as many crashes as most airports its size.

LeBlanc said he hopes the investigation will pinpoint where the problem is.

"With the amount of crashes we've been having, obviously we've got problems," LeBlanc said. "Sterling doesn't have these problems. There's one in Orange that doesn't have these problems."

Trying not to worry

Many airport neighbors speculate that the increased number of flights out of the airport may be causing the accidents.

"The airport has grown over the past 20 years," said Jackie Davis, wife of Glen Davis at 12 Monarch St. "But so have the residential areas around the airport."

She believes a manned air traffic control tower might help prevent future accidents.

Glen Davis agrees that something should be done.

"I've always been a supporter of the airport in the city. It's a great economic resource," he said. "But at a certain point you begin to wonder who's in control and whether anything can be done to make it safer."

"And when something happens in your back yard, it changes your whole outlook," he added.

Even after Tuesday's crash, Richard St. Jean said he doesn't spend time worrying about the accidents, because they come with the territory of living near an airport.

"We lived in Florida and there were several accidents. It doesn't bother me," St. Jean said. "I think you kind of expect it. There are so many small planes. They're in and out all the time. They've got to be really careful. All it takes is one little mistake."

Rob Cotton, 37, said he's not concerned about the airport, which is located near his Liberty Street home.

"I don't feel like I'm in danger. The probability of them hitting my house is as probable as me hitting the lottery," Cotton said. "I just feel bad for the families who lose loved ones."

Cotton said his family often watched the airport's annual air show from their house.

"My kids play out in the back yard and they enjoy seeing the planes," Cotton said. "I know there's a lot of crashes, but I don't feel in danger."

Lisa Guerriero contributed to this report.

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