

FAA: Planes can't fly these crowded skies

Aviation officials say tall buildings constrict airspace

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Hubris and audacity helped create the current Las Vegas skyline.

The people in charge of flying aircraft into Southern Nevada hope common sense makes some contributions to future versions.

On Monday, officials from the Federal Aviation Administration said Las Vegas is a textbook example of how building booms crowd airspace and that new obstacles are already cropping up that could complicate flights in the region decades from now.

"You still see a lot of construction up and down the Strip," said **Del Meadows**, the FAA's air traffic manager for the Las Vegas district. "Every new building takes another piece of airspace away."

Meadows said the impact of one building, such as the 1,149-foot Stratosphere tower, won't cause too many problems on its own.

But an accumulation of tall buildings over time can eventually make it more complicated for planes to arrive and depart and contribute to congestion in the skies.

In Las Vegas, the practical effect is a limit on the options air traffic controllers have to guide planes into and out of McCarran International Airport.

For example, when controllers guide incoming and outbound traffic using McCarran's north-south runway, they need to account for the Stratosphere tower.

Meadows said the location of the tower -- along with restrictions related to Nellis Air Force Base to the north -- make it nearly impossible for controllers to create a set route for planes heading north from McCarran.

Instead, controllers need to direct the planes as they gain altitude and go around the tower.

"The Stratosphere itself actually caused quite a few difficulties for us," he said.

The tower, completed in 1996, is the second-tallest structure west of the Mississippi River, according to the Infoplease Almanac. When it was proposed, the FAA said it would present a hazard for air traffic control.

But the tower was built anyway, which **Meadows** and **Kevin Haggerty**, manager of the FAA's obstruction evaluation service, say shows how little power the agency has to restrict building.

To make up for the lack of veto power, the FAA depends on collaboration with local jurisdictions to reduce conflicts between new buildings and airspace.

The collaborative approach paid dividends last year when the FAA, Clark County officials and developers of the proposed Crown Las Vegas project negotiated a compromise that reduced the potential height of the planned tower from 1,888 feet to no more than 1,064 feet. The Crown Las Vegas was eventually scrapped.

Meadows says FAA controllers view the skyline as a slope rising from the airport. The slope corresponds with how high aircraft can climb and maintain a safe distance from structures on the ground.

Therefore, a building that wouldn't be a problem several miles from the airport could restrict air traffic closer to the runways.

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"If someone wants to build something that penetrates that slope, that is a problem," **Meadows** said.

While officials say they are doing a better job collaborating with local governments to prevent new buildings from poking above the slope, potential future problems are already emerging about 25 miles southwest of Las Vegas.

Developers would like to install giant electricity-generating wind turbines about 10 miles from the proposed Ivanpah airport, a facility that's expected to eventually handle air traffic in addition to McCarran.

Ivanpah won't open until 2018 at the earliest, but some officials in the FAA and in Clark County are already worried about the proposed turbines.

One of the concerns is that the rotating turbines will be picked up by radar and cause confusion for air traffic controllers.

Meadows says there's already equipment that filters buildings and other static objects from the view of radar. But the equipment can't filter out moving objects, such as turbines.

"It will show up just like it is an airplane," he said.

The turbines have already spawned a case that was decided in federal appeals court on April 18.

In the case, the judge ruled in favor of Clark County, which alleged the FAA made an error when it decided the turbines wouldn't be a hazard for Ivanpah.

The decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit threw out the FAA ruling and ordered the agency to take another look at the issue.

Meadows and **Haggerty** made their remarks at the Mirage as part of an FAA conference on managing airspace.

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