



Redeveloping Santa Monica Airport Land: A Political History

Santa Monica Municipal Airport (SMO) encompasses 227 acres of the most valuable land in Southern California. The airport is low-density land use that protects SM from more traffic congestion.

But SMO's influence goes beyond its 227 acres. Because of Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) rules restricting building heights around airports, the SMO airspace also protects Santa Monica from high-rise buildings in adjacent Westside communities and the beach. It also restricts LAX air traffic overhead.

Politicians, developers and special interests know the value of SMO land and have had their eyes on it for years. The result has been multiple legal battles with the federal government, millions wasted on studies and development plans, and a revolving door of special interests seeking to cash-in at the expense of taxpayers.

The question voters will decide this November 4 is: Will politicians, developers and a few special interests succeed in redeveloping 227 acres of airport land without voter approval?

Look at the facts and you'll agree that it's time to stop the political game by putting final authority for this question in the hands of Santa Monica voters.

Redevelopment History¹

- August 1960:** City Council commissions study on redeveloping airport land for commercial and residential uses. Proposes massive mixed-use development for hotel, office buildings and retail, paid for by taxpayer-supported bonds.
- January 1962:** Santa Monica City Attorney confirms to politicians their legal obligations to maintain SMO for aviation according to the agreement with the FAA.
- January 1971:** Report is commissioned by Santa Monica politicians to plan for redevelopment of airport land as either industrial/office and/or a large regional shopping center.
- May 1971:** Economic Research Associates produce analysis that recommends development of a regional shopping center to meet 1980 market demand.
- February 1974:** Developer Del Webb confirms interest in developing airport land for a large-scale, master-planned, gated residential community.

¹ **Sources:** *Los Angeles Times* – various articles 1960-2014; and, City of Santa Monica, City Council Report – Santa Monica Airport Campus Phase III Findings, April 30, 2013.

- March 1981:** City Council invites developers to create an office park/campus on airport land.
- August 1981:** 2,000 citizens gather to oppose plan by politicians to close tax-paying businesses to pave the way for commercial redevelopment at SMO.
- July 1985:** Council issues two airport redevelopment proposals: one for office and the other for light-industrial development. State Senator Tom Hayden calls SMO “*The richest piece of public land left for development in all Southern California*” and chastises politicians for ignoring public opinion.
- September 1985:** City Council presents two airport redevelopment plans: one for huge 680,000 square feet of office buildings, 30,000 square feet of retail and parking for 2,720 cars. The other plan was for light-industrial buildings with structures for 1,900 parking spaces.
- May 1987:** Reliance Development Group submits a redevelopment plan for 1.3 million square feet of office space, a movie studio and multiple parking structures at SMO at the invitation of the City Council.
- November 1988:** Reliance Development Group submits a larger plan to Santa Monica politicians for 1.4-million square feet for office, studio facilities and parking structure developments at SMO.
- October 1989:** City Council approves the developer agreement with Reliance Development Group for 820,000 square feet of office space at SMO.
- October 1989:** Santa Monica voters begin gathering signatures for referendum on the Reliance Development proposal approved by City politicians.
- November 1989:** Santa Monica voters submit more than 9,000 signatures to place airport development approval on the ballot for a citywide vote.
- January 1990:** City Council rescinds approval of the development agreement with Reliance Development Group in face of widespread voter opposition.
- January 1990:** City Council continues to pursue airport redevelopment with Reliance Development Group. Begins planning for scaled-back office campus proposal.
- July 1991:** Congress passes the Airport Noise and Capacity Act (ANCA) and applies some of the nation’s strictest regulations on the hours of operation, type of aircraft and noise levels to SMO.
- October 2003:** Santa Monicans approve an 8.3-acre park on adjacent airport property that has no effect on airport operations.
- April 2007:** Additional airport land is made available to the public as a dog park and recreational area. Airport operations are unaffected.
- June 2008:** FAA confirms their legal status as the sole entity overseeing land-use planning at SMO.

- December 2010:** City Council directs staff to launch yet another planning process and commissions another study of future airport redevelopment options. The study drags on until 2013.
- April 2013:** City staff issues a report saying that if the airport is closed, “airport land will likely be redeveloped” and “the development would likely be dense.” The report adds that a “likely consequence would be significant development and attendant impacts, such as increased traffic ...” along with “... a difficult and protracted land-use debate akin to what Irvine has experienced in the aftermath of the El Toro closure.”
- October 2013:** City Council launches another taxpayer-funded lawsuit to take control of the airport from the FAA. Redevelopment activists demand that the City close the airport and build a “Great Park.”
- February 2014:** A U.S. Federal Court rules against the City once again and restates that the law grants the FAA sole authority over SMO and any changes to its aviation use.
- March 2014:** Ignoring multiple losses in court and the recommendations of their own lawyers and staff, the City Council votes to “starve out” airport support businesses while continuing to pursue control of future development at SMO on appeal.
- April 2014:** Santa Monica voters begin gathering signatures for the “Voters Decide” Charter Amendment to end the political conflict by giving voters the final authority over SMO redevelopment.
- June 2014:** Santa Monica voters submit over 15,700 signatures to qualify the “Voters Decide” measure for the November ballot. The signature total is approximately 6,000 more than required by law.

Lawsuits²

Rather than focusing on better planning and easing the traffic problem, the City Council has wasted millions of taxpayer dollars on unsuccessful litigation against the federal government. Failed attempts to violate the land-transfer agreements and grant assurances made to the federal government have dragged on for decades. Overall, there have been seven appellate court decisions about operations at the airport and many more cases and administrative proceedings! The City Council has lost every time but continues to spend taxpayer money for this political game.

The “Voters Decide” charter amendment will put an end to the political wrangling and place the final authority over redeveloping SMO land in the hands of the voters. Voters must approve any land-use changes from airport use, and unless such approval is given, the City will be required to keep the land in low-density airport use.

Voters will finally be heard on November 4, 2014.

² City of Santa Monica, City Council Report – Santa Monica Airport Campus Phase III Findings, April 30, 2013.