

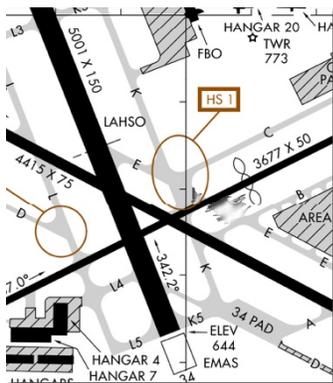
Why Closing PWK's Runway 6/24 is a Bad Idea
By the Chicago Executive Pilots Association
(January 15, 2020)

The Problem Facing GA Pilots at PWK – The Chicago Executive Airport's Master Plan – a glimpse at what the airport could look like over the next decade or so – has been evolving for five years. The first draft of a related Airport Layout Plan was recently delivered to the City of Prospect Heights and the Village of Wheeling for their approval. Once approved, Chicago Executive Airport (PWK) is free to apply to the FAA for reimbursement for much of the nearly \$3M spent on the plan. The airport is entitled to reimbursement so no argument here.

Unfortunately for the General Aviation community at PWK, the draft included plans to close PWK's runway 6/24 to make way for future hangar development, a plan that until last fall had not been made public. If the airport succeeds in closing runway 6/24, PWK would become the only airport within 100 nm of Chicago that does NOT have a runway pointed southwesterly to cope with strong crosswinds. If you think that's not important, you will one day when you try landing with a strong crosswind on 16 or 30 and realize the safest option is to divert to DuPage or Waukegan.

Interesting too, the PWK airport board attempted to close this very same runway in 2007 but those efforts were rebuked by both Wheeling and Prospect Heights citing safety to the flying public. The question of course ... if it was unsafe to close the runway in 2007, why is it OK in 2020? Of note too, when nearby Chicago O'Hare International Airport reconfigured its runways the city left in place both runway 22 Left and Right that point southwesterly because they understood the demands of aircraft and the nature of prevailing winds around Chicagoland.

To date, the PWK Airport Board has refused all attempts by CEPA to dialogue with them to share some of the vital information we possess that might prevent them from shutting down a much needed runway. This despite the fact that PWK is a public-use, publicly funded airport and that CEPA represents 2/3 of the airport's based aircraft. CEPA believes the first item on the airport's list of chores once the Master Plan is approved will be to close runway 6/24. We believe some of the arguments below will prove that such a move is not only a bad idea, but also completely unnecessary.



Crawford, Murphy & Tilly engineer Craig Loudon, a man intimately involved in creating the Master Plan implied at an early December 2019 meeting of the Wheeling Village Board that the runway must close due to safety issues surrounding Hot Spot #1 (left).

Airport Board Chairman Court Harris on December 18, 2019 said publicly that, "[runway 6/24] has been deemed unsafe by the FAA, an organization that is maniacally focused on safety." FAA airport specialists, however, told CEPA representatives this is absolutely not true. The agency has never labeled the runway unsafe, nor

recommended closure to mitigate a Hot Spot. If they had, ATC personnel in the tower would not be using 6/24 at all. This radical statement has certainly made pilots at PWK question much of the other information contained in the report.

A closer look at the graphic above – taken from a published Jeppesen chart – indicates that while Hot Spot #1 is near both runways 6/24 and 12/30, it does not actually include them. To be sure, near the end of the Master Plan Phase II summary, CM&T explains the real reason they want to close runway 6/24 is to use the land to develop more hangars. Confirming the airport’s plan for development, in the Master Plan Phase II, page 6, the engineers make their case for the future. “Combined with the existing geographical constraints which face CEA, it is plausible that a runway could be decommissioned in the future for more efficient land utilization.”

FAA sources told CEPA the reason Hot Spot #1 actually exists is because of the 5-way intersection of taxiways Kilo, Echo and Charlie ... too many options for a pilot to make a wrong turn, especially at night. Interestingly, CEPA learned that closing runway 6/24 won’t actually eliminate the 5-way intersection, nor will it solve the Hot Spot #1 problem as the airport has been broadcasting. The FAA’s Advisory Circular, Engineering Brief and other public FAA documents recommend solutions that include signage, lighting and reconfiguration of taxiway geometry, not runway closures.

At the January 15, 2020 PWK airport board meeting, member Ray Lang expressed surprise at this notion. Neither he nor any of the other airport board members appeared to be concerned on learning that the board chairman’s comment about runway 6/24 being unsafe was simply made up. So why the apparent ruse?

Another reason the airport says it wants to close the runway is that, according to the Master Plan Phase II, page 6, “FAA has previously stated that future AIP funds cannot be used to maintain Runway 6/24.” However, according to engineering personnel from the Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT), there is nothing that prevents AIP money from being used to maintain runway 6/24. The real issue is that a third runway is a low priority for this funding, a big difference. CEPA also discovered a document through a previous FOIA request that shows that slightly more than \$4.6M was approved a few years back specifically to reconstruct runway 6/24. That money was suddenly pulled back for some unknown reason. At the January board meeting, even the Airport Board Chairman made it clear he had no idea such funding had ever existed.

The airport’s message has been that no one uses runway 6/24 and that essentially no one would miss it anyway. They claim they have the data to prove it. That is not correct, however. Runway 6/24’s use, admittedly low, is of similar magnitude to that of runway 12/30. Runway 6/24 is a lifesaver for pilots when strong southwest winds are howling. The Master Plan Report Phase II states: “The runway configuration at CEA has been constructed to minimize the percentage of time that strong crosswinds make the use of the airport inadvisable.” CEPA learned Runway 6/24 is needed to meet FAA’s minimum standards for wind coverage for airport layout.

Since so much of PWK's traffic arrives from the northwest, north and northeast, it is much easier for ATC to simply assign everyone runway 16 landing to the south. This of course creates noise havoc over the Village of Wheeling. Air Traffic Controllers from nearby O'Hare International Airport have told CEPA that traffic departing runway 24 rather than 16 would certainly help the flow of local air traffic since it avoids the east-west airline flow at ORD. Another part of the usage problem of runway 6/24 is that air traffic controllers at PWK don't like using both runway 16/34 and 6/24 at the same time because of the crossing runway situation it sets up to their operation. They don't use crossing runways because they admit they're not trained in that effort. The recently retired tower manager made it clear he saw no need to train controllers on crossing runway operations.

The airport has told the public for years that few pilots use runway 6/24 because of the tall trees in the Cook County Forest Preserve east of the airport. The simple solution would be to negotiate a method to regularly top some of the Forest Preserve trees. The airport's inability to successfully negotiate a tree trimming agreement with Cook County years ago forced the effective length of the runway 24 to be reduced. CEPA however, has been in contact with Cook County personnel who said they would be interested in trying to negotiate a fresh solution to our runway 6/24 problem, even if that means regularly topping some of the tallest trees on the runway 24 final approach. Again, the Airport Board refuses to respond to our attempts to mitigate this issue.

Before the airport can close runway 6/24, they must prove to the FAA that the remaining runways 12/30 and 16/34 can safely handle a 10.5 knot crosswind for aircraft operations 95% of the time. That raises the issue of the wind data analysis the airport's engineering consultants created. CM&T says its analysis proves the remaining runways will meet the agency's crosswind requirements. However engineers working with CEPA analyzed the very same wind data used by CM&T and reached a different conclusion, showing the remaining runway will not meet the 95% requirement year round, especially in certain seasons of prevailing southwest winds when the control tower is operational.

Then there are the rosy traffic projections created by CM&T for the Master Plan. Those traffic projections show some disturbing trends. When they're are matched to actual airport traffic data, they fall seriously short; PWK traffic numbers in 2019 declined nearly 10 percent from 2018 alone. So why the rush to close 6/24 to create more room for hangars when fewer aircraft are using the airport. Why the need to keep the runway closure issue under wraps until the last minute? CEPA believes this most likely is because the Airport Board knows their ideas and data related to runway funding and safety hot spots won't stand up to public scrutiny. The Airport Board is also hoping the two communities that actually own the airport will simply believe everything they read in the Master Plan and fail to ask any penetrating questions.

But if CEPA is able to discover the real motives behind the airport's desire to close the runway is to build more hangars and not really the hot spot safety or funding issues, surely they must know the FAA and the flying public can as well.

Generally pilots around the nation have taken action when an airport or runway closure issue appears knowing that the loss of even a single runway drives yet another nail in the coffin for general aviation. The real question at PWK is whether the pilot population is willing to simply stand by and let runway 6/24 be made unusable simply to build more hangars based on old engineering forecasts of additional airport traffic alone, or make their voices heard to protect their rights.

Is runway 6/24 a perfect runway? Of course not. But it is usable and essential for safety. With some additional effort, it could be transformed into an even more effective runway, something that many flight instructors would like to see since their student pilots are often forced to accept dangerous crosswind conditions on both runway 12/30 or runway 16/34.

Of note, too, since CEPA has begun its efforts to prevent the airport from closing the runway, and to reach out to tower personnel, there has been an increased usage of runway 6/24 by ATC personnel certainly during times of strong southwesterly wind conditions and often merely when the winds favor that surface. Until recently, that was not the case.

Looking deeper though, and with a little bit of cooperative work on the part of the airport, the FAA and local pilots, there really are no good reasons runway 6/24 shouldn't remain the solid crosswind runway it was always meant to be.

For more information about the CEPA Save Runway 6/24 committee and to learn how you can help, contact committee chairman Rob Mark at 847-644-1575 or via e-mail at rmark@commavia.com.