

CAPE COD TIMES

Sunday, May 7, 2023

Opinion/Your Turn: Move Hyannis airport operations to Otis airbase, use land for housing

Betty Ludtke, *Columnist*

A guy walks into a bar ... wait no, he actually walked into a Barnstable Town Council meeting. The guy's name is Paul Phalan, and instead of a punch line, he delivered a brilliant idea during public comment. In short, he said we should build housing at Cape Cod Gateway Airport. I found his comment creative and bold. He got it right and here's why.

There is a vibrant new development in Denver, Colorado, known as Central Park. It is comprised of twelve neighborhoods, with a myriad of housing types and styles, parks, shops and schools, all connected by scores of biking and walking trails and mass transit. It is a completely planned community; no happenstance, purely the result of decades of thoughtful, focused work. It stands on the site of the former Denver Stapleton Airport. Stapleton closed in 1995 when the new Denver International Airport opened. Stapleton's closure brought Central Park to life.

Airports are community lifelines; essential parts of our 21st-century lifestyle. When airports first appeared, who could have imagined one would literally save the population of a city? Tempelhof Airport, in Berlin Germany, was an airport that did just that. The citizens of West Berlin were saved from falling under Soviet control by the Berlin Airlift in 1948 and 1949. I visited Tempelhof in the 1980s, during the Cold War; the U.S. Air Force was in residence and planes still flew in and out. By October 2008, the airport had closed permanently.

When I returned to Tempelhof in 2019 the airfield had become a vast park full of all manner of recreational activity. I visited late on a summer evening when

daylight seems to last forever, and it could have been the middle of the day for the number of people enjoying the vastness of the former runways and taxiways. National Public Radio aired a story on Jan. 29, 2008, the year Tempelhof closed. They interviewed Lt. Gail S. Halvorsen, the famous “Candy Bomber” from the Berlin Airlift, and said, “The former airlift pilot, now 87, insists that Tempelhof needs air traffic to keep its spirit intact.”

Halvorsen died at the age of 101 in 2022. I think he would be pleased that the free spirit of Berlin is alive and thriving at Tempelhof today — with no aircraft present.

Twelve miles west, as the airplane flies, from Cape Cod Gateway Airport in Hyannis is the still operational Otis Air National Guard Base on Joint Base Cape Cod. The F-15s, which took off with full afterburners on Sept. 11, 2001, have been gone for a while now, but the U.S. Coast Guard (Air Station Cape Cod) and U.S. Army aviation missions remain steadfast. With its essential search and rescue mission, the Coast Guard will likely never leave.

When Paul Phalan made his comment, he knew the Cape Cod Gateway Airport was the perfect place for housing —but he didn’t know where to move the air operations. The answer is Otis.

Today, Charleston International Airport in South Carolina is jointly operated with the C-17 airlift mission of the U.S. Air Force at Joint Base Charleston. Military and civil air operations in Charleston seamlessly share the runways and the associated navigational aids. Airports, especially large ones, serving commercial operations, are hugely expensive propositions. Wherever efficiencies in operations can be achieved, they should be.

We are at a tipping point on Cape Cod. We do not have the housing we need and proposals from developers are met with stiff opposition. The reasons for the opposition are evident in the data collected by the town of Barnstable in their Local Comprehensive Plan effort. Above all, Barnstable residents want to protect water resources and they love the character of their villages.

At the most recent meeting of the Local Comprehensive Plan Committee, a member opined that maybe four more houses could be built in Cotuit. Cape

Codders think the life they know is slipping away owing to overdevelopment. Something has got to give. We shouldn't be fighting amongst ourselves over housing. We shouldn't have to have our backs against the wall. Nothing good comes of that — only stress, anger and poor decisions.

The land taken up by the Cape Cod Gateway Airport could find its highest and best use for housing; a lot of housing. The air operations could continue and thrive at Joint Base Cape Cod. Operating two major airports on Cape Cod is not sustainable and it is not justifiable, it just isn't. The Hyannis airport is encroached, the airfield at Otis is not, at least not yet, but with overdevelopment, it too will become encroached.

I foresee three major goals for the reuse of Cape Cod Gateway Airport, first and foremost housing, second an opportunity to rationalize the preponderance of Steamship Authority and Hi-Line parking near the Mid-Cape Highway and third, an opportunity to relieve east-west vehicle traffic flow with a new parkway through the site.

I've discussed my thoughts with Katie Servis, the Cape Cod Gateway Airport manager. She is modifying her statement of work for the upcoming Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) on the proposed expansion of the Cape Cod Gateway airport to include an alternative to study a joint operation at the Otis airfield. I trust this alternative will be given due diligence in the DEIR.

I hope others will join in working toward a solution that gives the Cape Cod Gateway Airport a new home worthy of its name. We have a rare opportunity for Cape Codders to rally around what could be a truly regional solution to our housing crisis. Just as the shuttered Denver Stapleton Airport gave life to Central Park, the shuttered Cape Cod Gateway Airport could provide the impetus for the most beneficial master planning effort Cape Cod has ever seen.

Thank you Paul Phalan for inspiring me with your bold vision.

Betty Ludtke is a Barnstable Town Councilor representing Barnstable's Third Precinct. She is a commercial airline pilot flying Boeing 787 aircraft and a 30-year veteran of the U.S. Air Force.