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**F-35s at Truax Field are so loud
they disrupt life, work and school
for Madisonians. Why will it take
so long to do anything about it?**

By Andrew Bahl



Lost in the noise



COVER STORY

Lost in the noise

Boosters of the F-35 fighter jets have said they are a big boon for Madison's economy — but those living around the airport aren't so sure. **AMBER ARNOLD / BRANDON RAYGO**

NEW F-35S AT TRUAX FIELD ARE SO LOUD THEY DISRUPT LIFE, WORK AND SCHOOL FOR MADISONIANS, RESIDENTS SAY. WHY WILL IT TAKE SO LONG TO DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT?

By Andrew Bahl

Tom Berman considers his home to be pretty close to paradise, whether that means sipping a cup of coffee in the morning, splitting wood for his heater or sitting with his wife in the garden after work.

That includes watching planes touch down at Dane County Regional Airport, across the street from his house, particularly when they glide in for a landing against a sunset splashed across the sky.

The F-35 fighter jets, however, are anything but relaxing.

Since they arrived in April, the booms from their takeoffs and landings have scattered his cats, disrupted his engraving business, which Berman runs out of his basement, and literally sent shockwaves through his body.

"I don't know if it is the fight or flight

(reflex), or the adrenaline, or what it is, but it starts as (the plane) is coming closer

and closer," said Berman, who has lived in his current house since 1984. "And then if you're unlucky enough to be outside it is very unpleasant. It hurts."

For the officials who lobbied for the F-35s to come to the Truax Field Air National Guard Base, the

delivery of the next generation fighter jets was a boon, a way to preserve the 1,600-plus jobs at the base and the estimated \$100 million in economic activity it generates per year.

But for those whose backyards, workplaces or schools are around the airport, the planes have been an unwelcome development. Teachers complain the planes are so loud they can make younger students cry and residents say they no longer enjoy spending time outside.

There are concerns that the planes will

cause hearing problems and health issues for residents around the airport in the long term, including low-income residents and communities of color that are disproportionately concentrated in those neighborhoods.

Earlier this year, the Wisconsin Air National Guard celebrated a federal grant to help the military unit study the noise effects of the jets, as well as hold events in the community to solicit resident feedback and educate people about the impact of the 115th Fighter Wing.

But the study process is in a holding pattern. And that analysis must be completed for the state to apply for more federal money to help residents tackle the noise problem. That help won't arrive until next year, at the earliest.

All the while, planes are flying overhead and residents fear any mitigation efforts will be inadequate to reverse what they experience as a detriment to public health.

"I feel like I've just been forsaken, thrown out with the trash," said Melina Lozano, a teacher at Hawthorne Elementary School, which sits a mile-and-a-half southeast of the airport and has 307 students.

"We don't matter here on the northeast side of Madison."

Residents, schools fear long-term hearing loss

There has been debate over whether the new F-35s are louder than their predecessor, the F-16, which was also based in Madison.

Noise testing by the Dutch government found the F-35s were two decibels quieter than the F-16s. Other research has determined the F-35s to be significantly louder.

But a 2019 Public Health Madison & Dane County study found that, in the long run, the jets' arrival would create a 27% increase in noise exposure. In the short-term, that effect would be even more pronounced.

By 2027, the F-35s will account for over 4,200 takeoffs and landings each year in Madison, according to a noise study conducted by the Dane County Regional Airport.

To date, the number of takeoffs and landings in 2023 has been smaller, as only eight of the 20 jets that will ultimately be stationed at Truax Field have arrived.



Top: Tom Berman looks at noise data generated from a monitor installed at his home north of the Madison airport. **Bottom:** Berman runs an engraving business out of his basement but says the fighter jets can be so loud when they take off or land that it hurts. **RUTHIE HAUGE**

But the arrival of the F-35s means that over 2,200 residents and over 1,000 households now would have an average sound level of 65 decibels over the course of a day, according to an environmental impact study conducted by the Air Force in 2020.

Sixty-five decibels is roughly equivalent to a normal conversation from 3 feet away and is the level the Federal Aviation Administration has deemed to be "incompatible with residential use."

But that standard is flawed and out-

dated and doesn't take into account more up-to-date research that suggests harm from lower decibels, according to Steven Klafka, director of the advocacy group Safe Skies, Clean Water, which has opposed the jets.

The World Health Organization, for one, says that average aircraft noise exposure above 45 decibels can lead to negative health effects.

And that doesn't consider the peak noises generated by the aircraft. Noise monitors installed at Berman's house, for

instance, can top 115 decibels when the F-35s fly over. That's also true at Klafka's house, which sits several miles away in the Atwood neighborhood.

The National Institutes of Health says repeated exposure to sounds at or above 85 decibels can cause permanent hearing loss, with louder noises more quickly inducing hearing problems. Other studies show exposure to loud noises can contribute to everything from a greater risk of heart attacks to higher levels of stress and anxiety.

"It's going to be decades before they finish the noise mitigation," Klafka said. "By then, a whole generation of kids will have been impacted by the extra noise and, if you read the literature, they will be affected the rest of their lives by that extra exposure."

The airport, however, is limited to using only the 65-decibel standard, said Michael Riechers, a spokesperson for Dane County Regional Airport. Because that is the FAA's requirement, deviating from it would jeopardize the ability to access federal noise mitigation money.

And the airport does not have a direct role in negotiating ways to minimize the noise impact of the fighter jets, he said.

"The Wisconsin Air National Guard works directly with the local FAA Air Traffic Controllers to establish noise abatement procedures and predetermined flight corridors to minimize the impact of military aircraft noise on the surrounding community," Riechers said in an email.

The airport's noise evaluation says that 35% of all F-35 departures use a southern-facing runway, which would entail planes taking off over the more densely populated area that includes the Eken Park neighborhood and the area around Madison East High School.

Leslie Westmont, a spokesperson for the state Department of Military Affairs, said that the goal is for most flights to take off to the north, which is near less densely populated areas.

"There has been consistent and intentional effort to take off to the north to mitigate noise impacts to the city as much as possible," Westmont said. "It would be our intention to take off to the north during every takeoff; however, occasionally the wind or safety does not allow for us to do so."

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In addition, Westmont said the flight schedule “does not have F-35 takeoffs or landings during the hours in the morning when children typically transit to school.”

The Air Force environmental impact study, however, found that “there would be significant disproportionate impacts to low-income and minority populations as well as children” in the immediate area surrounding the airport.

That is not news to Lozano, who said the noise is still enough to make students cry or lose their train of thought during a half-finished math equation. And it can be especially pronounced in schools that lack air-conditioning, such as Hawthorne, as the windows are more likely to be open.

“It's really frightening, especially when you can tell (the kids) just really don't even realize what's going on,” she said. “They're scared that something is attacking the school.”

Work to counteract F-35 noise could be years away

The neighborhoods immediately surrounding the airport are both poorer and have more residents of color than the city as a whole. That has long led to fears that they would bear the brunt of any noise burdens.

There are 13 areas near the airport that are newly exposed to average daily sound levels of over 65 decibels. Six of those have a poverty rate greater than 20%.

That new “incompatible for residential use” zone now includes Loren Berry and hundreds of her fellow residents at Oak Park Terrace Mobile Home Park.

Berry's home, where she has lived since 2014, directly backs up to the long-term parking lots at the airport. Like other local residents, she recalled getting a postcard advertising a public meeting back when the Air Force was weighing whether to bring the F-35s to Madison.

But since then, Berry said things have been all quiet from the Air National Guard and the airport regarding their noise surveys.

That's unlike the planes themselves, which she said have caused her to change her work-from-home schedule to ensure she isn't on the phone at 3 p.m., when they often take off from the base.

“I heard about it on the news and just



Hawthorne Elementary School teacher Melina Lozano is pictured on the school's playground in Madison. Lozano has spoken out against Traux Field's recent acquisition of F-35 fighter jets. 📍 RUTHIE HAUGE

other people in general just speaking about it,” Berry said. “And they're like ‘It's the same as the F-16!’ ... I don't think it is, though.”

Help to address the issue could be years away.

Wisconsin is set to apply for millions in federal grant funding that can be used to buy noise mitigation materials, such as windows and drywall to dampen the sound, relocate residents in affected areas and purchase land to help create a buffer between the airport and populated areas. A total of \$5 million of those funds is specifically set aside for areas that recently received new fighter jets.

But the state first must undertake a noise mitigation study of its own and that process has yet to begin, with the Department of Military Affairs not yet at the point of picking a contractor to conduct the work.

Part of the hold-up, Westmont said, is that Dane County Regional Airport is in the midst of the second part of its noise

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mitigation assessment, which focuses on what strategies might be necessary.

The airport has said that document won't be submitted to the FAA until early next year. In order to avoid duplicating resources, the state wants to wait until that process is complete.

And the \$798,000 grant awarded to the National Guard to complete the study must be used to research noise, not fix it.

“This restriction limits our ability to initiate noise mitigation efforts immediately and necessitates a careful and deliberate planning process to ensure that

the funds are utilized in compliance with the grant's provisions,” Westmont said.

But that grant will also be used for other purposes. The Department of Military Affairs and the airport will enlist a consultant to conduct a community relations campaign in partnership with the airport.

“This project will consist of a situational analysis, stakeholder surveys and interviews, a public portal to easily access information, an engagement and outreach plan, community, and stakeholder focus groups, listening sessions, educational outreach, and will end with a community summit,” Westmont said.

Fears that mitigation efforts won't help all who need them

Even when concrete mitigation efforts begin, Klafka worries that the implementation might drag on for years or decades. A base in Burlington, Vermont also has the F-35s, and efforts there to

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insulate houses in the 65-decibel zone could take four decades.

And there is a concern that using the 65-decibel standard to determine who is in need of assistance might exclude many of the people living around Madison's airport.

"There's 60,000 people that live within three miles of the airport," Klafka said. "Most of them would not get any protection."

In 1991, the last time the airport conducted an FAA-mandated noise survey, officials outlined a number of noise mitigation strategies.

Some, Riechers said, were ultimately deemed unnecessary, such as ramping up land acquisition in nearby Cherokee Marsh and Token Creek Park to serve as a buffer against the sounds of planes taking off and landing.

At the time, the airport opted not to work on noise mitigation in nearby schools, as none was found to be in the 65-decibel zone. In the most recent airport noise study, only one school — Madison Area Technical College — was in an area that might make them eligible for mitigation measures.

But a half-dozen other schools lie within several miles of the airport, including Hawthorne and Emerson Elementary School, which Julia Richard's son attends.

Richard's home faces the playground at the school and she sees fighter jets fly overhead on a near-daily basis while kids play at recess.

She acknowledges that her home and the school both sit outside of the 65-decibel zone. But she's not even sure how much noise mitigation strategies could offer her neighborhood anyway.


"I don't want to be stuck in my house," she said. "I want to be able to have my windows open on a nice warm day, you know? I want the kids across the street to be playing outside."

Lease, PFAS concerns also worry residents

Opponents of the F-35s have urged Dane County not to move forward with an extension of the Air National Guard lease at the airport, which is county government property.

After the previous lease expired in 2020, the base has operated under an informal



Top: Julia Richards, a mother who works from home, directly across the street from Emerson Elementary School in Madison, looks up at the sky to determine where plane noise is coming from. **Bottom:** Tom Berman and his wife, Sok Sun Berman, spend nice days sitting in the backyard of their home in Madison. The Bermans live directly north of Traux Field and are dealing with the noise of F-35 fighter jets and PFAS contamination in their well.  RUTHIE HAUGE

agreement with the county government. County officials now want to approve a new 10-year lease with a nominal \$100 payment from the Air National Guard, with any firefighting and crash response responsibilities for military aircraft falling to the Guard.

In exchange, the county is required to release the state and federal governments from liability from pollution caused

by any of the military activities at the airport, including possible contamination from firefighting foam and other substances — language which has raised concern about its potential impact.

The contract also requires the Air National Guard to support the county airport's noise abatement plan while "keeping the noise level of its operations as low as practicable" when possible.

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"There's tremendous impacts that are happening, costs that are borne by somebody," Klafka said. "And they're letting the National Guard off the hook, and not even willing to talk about it."

A Dane County Board of Supervisors committee elected last week to delay a vote on the measure to allow residents to gather more information on the lease proposal.

All the while, 2023 hasn't been kind to Berman, the homeowner who lives northwest of the airport.

In addition to the F-35s, Berman recently learned that his well water is contaminated with PFAS, or per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances. The toxic chemicals have been used in many common household items, as well as firefighting foam at airports across the state, including Madison.

But despite all of this, he says he doesn't plan to move and doesn't hold any ill will toward the airport, as "they were here first."

The 115th Fighter Wing, however, is another story. He wants the fighter jets to be shelved or moved elsewhere in the state, where noise pollution is less intrusive.

Even if mitigation help does come to Madison, he said it won't do much to change his reality: His home is less of a paradise now.

"We sit on the porch and have coffee in the morning and we sit up in the swing and have beer in the evening," Berman said. "How do you mitigate the noise on my front porch, my backyard, Warner Park, the children's playgrounds? You don't. There's no noise mitigation for that stuff, just for the buildings. There's no mitigation for Cherokee Marsh.

"There's no mitigation unless you put a dome over top of us." 