



Governor Evers: It's Time for a New Air National Guard Mission for Truax Field

In your 2023 State of the State Address, you said: "When we do what's best for our kids, we do what's best for our state." It is time for you to show the residents of Madison that these were not just empty words.

The Air Force may soon bring a squadron of F-35A fighter jets to Madison. This will cause a dramatic increase in noise and safety problems for residents and their children. However, we have a solution that's a win-win for all concerned: the airport, the Air National Guard (ANG), local public officials and our community. It's a cheap fix that aligns with our Madison values.

The solution is a new mission for the ANG base at Truax Field. Everyone will win. Now is the time to take action.

Since 1948, our local airbase has hosted numerous military aircraft including Mustangs, Scorpions, Sabres, F-89s, F-102 Delta Daggers, Dragonflies, and finally, A-10s and F-16s. Except for a brief interval in the 1970s, the mission of the base has always been the training of fighter jet pilots.

But that mission is no longer suitable for our growing urban area, especially when the greatest impacts now fall on those least able to defend themselves: children, low-income residents and people of color.

By selecting Truax for basing of a squadron of F-35A joint strike fighter jets, the US Air Force showed exceedingly poor and irresponsible judgement. This decision ignored the values of Madison residents and our aspirations for a livable and sustainable city. This decision required the Air Force to ignore environmental justice and promote environmental racism. Using outdated noise standards which underestimate the impacts of the more frequent and louder F-35 jets, nearly 3,000 people will now live in areas considered "incompatible with residential use." The Air Force and ANG ignored their continuing contamination of our groundwater, Starkweather Creek and Lake Monona with toxic "forever" PFAS chemicals and the exposure of residents to PFAS in drinking water and fish.

Besides the safety concerns inherent in the new and unproven F-35 itself—its toxic composite construction, stealth coating, and the fact that military experts consider it "a work in progress" unfit for prime time—there are other reasons the F-35 will fail to make Madison residents safe and secure. Military experts have testified to the Vermont Legislature that, in the event of nuclear hostilities, cities like Burlington and Madison will be targeted regardless if the nuclear bombs are stored here. We will be getting the most expensive weapon in human history at \$110 million a pop, a plane which doesn't work, has a poor safety record, and will make us a nuclear target!

Stationing F-35s in Madison is Child Abuse: Pure and Simple

Governor Evers: You, more than anyone, must be profoundly aware of the problems and obstacles faced by our children and the schools they attend. The system for funding our schools is in major need of reform. Some Madison schools that serve the most at-risk students suffer from teacher vacancies and a severe shortage of substitute teachers. The president of the substitute educators group describes the situation as a "vicious downward cycle."

As you are well aware, the "opportunity gap" between reading and math scores of Wisconsin's white and black students is the highest of any state.

"People voted (for me) because they believe, as I do, that we should fully fund our public schools, keep class sizes small, invest in kid's mental health, and retain and build upon our talented education workforce," you said in your second inaugural address. Yes, you are right. That is why we voted for you.

In your State of the State Address, you declared 2023 the Year of Mental Health. "We cannot overstate the profound impact that the past few years have had on our kids in many ways—and that includes their mental health," you noted. "Kids in crisis are often distracted or disengaged in class, might not be able to finish their homework, and won't be able to focus on their studies at home or at school."

"We all want to improve outcomes and ensure our kids are prepared for success ... And we'll start by making sure our kids can bring their full and best selves to our schools and our classrooms," you pledged. And we would like to believe you meant what you said. But instead of putting out the fire, it seems you are preparing to pour more fuel on it. Fighter jet fuel.

The reality is that airport noise, particularly fighter jet noise, is not a recipe for success for our struggling Madison students. Even the Air Force does not dare deny this fact.

Pediatrician Elizabeth Neary wrote in the Capital Times in 2019: "I believe that many of Madison's children will be harmed by the intense noise generated by these military jets ... The early years of a child's life are critical for the development of hearing. According to the Office of Disease Prevention at the National Institutes of Health, children's ear canals continue to develop during the early years of life and loud noises during this stage of development can permanently damage their hearing."

"The noise created by the F-35s is an impulse sound—a brief, very loud noise. Impulse noise causes more severe hearing loss than steady state noise. The body has a reflex mechanism which protects the ear when exposed to loud, continuous noise. The reflex is slow, and thus does not provide protection to the ear against sudden impulsive sounds."

"Health impacts of noise pollution include overproduction of stress hormones, interruption of sleep, ringing in the ear, negative effects on mental health, increased blood pressure and impacts on cardiovascular disease."

"For children, the impacts are far greater. Heightened noise interruptions can lead to delayed speech development, reduced attention, impaired concentration, long-term memory issues and decreased math and reading comprehension. The EIS [Air Force Environmental Impact Statement, 2019] includes a section on the impact of noise on children, citing studies that have found a linear relation between chronic aircraft noise exposure and impaired reading comprehension and recognition memory."

Chronic exposure to high levels of aircraft noise not only impairs learning and school performance. Noise-induced stress response can exacerbate symptoms of anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in children and adults. Non-auditory health effects of noise in children include increased psychosocial activation, hyperactivity symptoms, nervousness and helplessness.

All of this led the World Health Organization (WHO) and a NATO working group to conclude that daycare centers and schools should not be located near major noise sources like airports. **There are 59 daycares and schools within three miles of Truax Field!**

It should be obvious, Governor Evers, that acquiescing to the Air Force's plans to base F-35 fighter jets at Truax is totally antithetical to your professed desire to "make sure our kids can bring their full and best selves to our schools and our classrooms." With seven interruptions of their school day each hour and 7,190 flight take-offs and landings each year, there is no way our children can possibly bring their "best selves" to school—physically, mentally or emotionally.

While you are trying to convince the State Legislature to invest more funds in schools and mental health services, the Air Force will be squandering \$2,200 million of our tax dollars on one squadron of first-strike bombers that will bring all of your well-intentioned efforts to naught.

You Have An Option: It's Time for a Change

In its rebuttal to Safe Skies Clean Water's court suit in the US District of Columbia, the Air Force refused to consider any alternatives to its basing proposal, as required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). **But you have an alternative, Governor Evers. There is a very satisfactory option still open.**

In her rebuttal to the Air Force, the Safe Skies attorney quoted from the Noise Working Guide of the Department of Defense:

"When an installation can no longer fully support its current or future mission **because of noise or other impacts on the adjacent community**, DoD has little choice but to consider operational alternatives to help reduce noise that could degrade training, or to **relocate flying units to other locations.**" (emphasis added)

The solution is clear. You must use your power as governor to demand a new mission for the 115th ANG that does not involve the training of fighter jet pilots. Air National Guard missions change all the time and there are many to choose from. The current mission is no longer appropriate for Madison.

Under state law, the Air National Guard provides protection of life and property and preserves peace, order and public safety. These missions are accomplished through emergency relief support during natural disasters such as floods, earthquakes and forest fires; search and rescue operations; support to civil defense authorities; maintenance of vital public services and counterdrug operations. With climate change and the likelihood of more pandemics, there will be increasing need for these services.

Plenty of Options to Choose From

In 2013, the New Mexico Air National Guard changed from a fighter mission to training crews in special operations and personal recovery. The same year, the 132nd Wing in Iowa changed its mission. In 2016, the Great Falls Air Guard Base in Montana transitioned from F-15 fighter jets to C-130 transport aircraft. At Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama, the 908th Airlift Wing recently swapped C-130 cargo planes for MH-139 Gray Wolf helicopters.

According to retired Air Force Colonel Rosanne Greco of Vermont, the Air Force need for transport, cargo and refueling aircraft is growing. Air National Guard stations in 24 other states now fly transport aircraft and 18 units fly the C-130 cargo plane. The Air Force Times reports that mobility aircraft help others, enhance US global reputation and build trust. Greco also noted that transport pilot skills are ideally suited for flying large commercial airliners, thus providing guard members with practical job experience.

A fighter jet is useless to fulfill the state portion of the ANG mission. A jet fighter can't "preserve peace, order and public safety." A jet fighter is worthless in a natural disaster or pandemic. It's not effective for search and rescue. It can't help maintain vital public services. It can't do much of anything except kill black and brown people in other countries.

It's noteworthy that there is no Airborne Firefighting guard unit closer than Wyoming to the northern national forests of Wisconsin, Michigan and Minnesota. There are four states that have units with a medical evacuation mission but none closer than Charleston, WV. Three states have units with a search and rescue mission but not a single one in the upper Midwest and Great Lakes region.

You Have the Power: It's Time to Use It

We assume you want to do the right thing for the people of Madison, Governor Evers, particularly for our children. But we can anticipate your objection, (because we've heard it so often from other public officials). You will tell us you "don't have the power" to do anything. But you do. Your power is inscribed in the Constitution.

The governor of Oklahoma contested the DoD's COVID vaccine mandate in federal court in late 2021, arguing that the Guard should be exempted. Ironically, Federal District Judge Stephen Friot ruled against the Oklahoma governor while also clearly detailing the considerable powers that state governors have under the Constitution, federal law, and Army and Air Force regulations.

As Judge Friot spelled out, states are responsible for "Appointment of the Officers, and the Authority of training the Militia" according to the discipline prescribed by Congress. (Emphasis added.) The judge wrote that this allocation of responsibility and authority is prescribed by the militia clause in the Constitution and "envisioned as well by Congress."

The judge further amplified this state authority, stating:

Until such time as a unit of the Guard is "federalized", that is, ordered into federal service by the appropriate authority, the Commander and Chief of the constituent units of the Oklahoma Guard (and of the Oklahoma Guard as a whole) is the Governor ... The command authority of the Governor, the Adjutant General, and their subordinates includes such matters as recruiting, training and pressing Guard units into service when necessary within the boundaries of the state.

Under the Constitution and this federal court decision from December 28, 2021, the governor has command responsibility for the training of the state national guard. It should come as no surprise that no federal mission actually requires that F-35 fighter jet training be conducted in the middle of a high-density city. On the contrary, federal law and law-of-war standards in various military regulations mandate against this practice.

Governor Evers, you are not just a governor, but also the Commander and Chief whenever Air Force or Army guard units are not fighting overseas. You have the power and responsibility to protect our Madison community from an extremely negative situation.

In your statement declaring 2023 the Year of Mental Health, you noted that about one third of our kids experience feelings of sadness and hopelessness nearly every day. We can only assume this statistic is much worse for low-income children and black and brown children who live and go to school in the shadow of Truax Field. To borrow your own words from a recent radio address on the same subject: This is "a quiet, burgeoning crisis that ... will have catastrophic consequences for generations if we don't treat it with the urgency it requires."

Rather than continue with this divisive and senseless plan to station F-35 fighter jets in our community, let's work together to find a new mission for the 115th that will benefit us all. We can save our children from further harm or continue to feed the military industrial complex in a very wasteful and imprudent way.