

# Holding Up Progress

## How New Haven Neighborhoods Stopped an Airport Expansion

Dan Fischer

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“Stop the madness and expand Tweed. Two neighborhoods can’t hold up economic progress,” pronounced a local newspaper columnist, directing his ire at residents on the edge of New Haven and East Haven, Connecticut. There, the grassroots Stop Tweed campaign has so far halted the expansion of Tweed Airport.

“It’s a scrappy group. It’s really a leaderless organization,” explains Rachel Herrera, a Stop Tweed member. They don’t have nonprofit status or receive foundation funding. Members meet at a neighbor’s house and discuss plans over homemade cookies. They make decisions by consensus.

Last spring, they went up against some of the state’s most entrenched interests. And they won.

According to Stop Tweed’s Sean O’Brien, the airport “serves Yale [University] and the elite circles that rely upon private jet service. Tweed is very busy when the Clinton or Bush or Kerry families come to visit.”

In a thinly disguised act of green-washing, the airport’s backers inserted into a solar power incentive bill a clause allowing Tweed to expand its runway length by almost 2,000 feet. It was a risky move for legislators to try to avoid open debate on such an important issue.

Once Stop Tweed spread the word about this maneuver, local residents were outraged. They joined demonstrations, signed petitions, and turned out in large numbers to municipal and state governmental meetings.

“We didn’t have any democratic control beyond showing up, speaking loudly, and rejecting attempts to placate us,” O’Brien recounts. They succeeded in defeating the legislation.

“I’m impressed that we’ve been able to stop expansion,” remarks Herrera. “I thought it was kind of a done deal, but I thought ‘go ahead and swing at the windmill.’ This is a fight worth fighting because I’m fighting for the land, and I’m fighting for clean air and clean water.”

Most Connecticut residents don’t use the Tweed Airport and hardly think about its disastrous effects on the surrounding wetlands and wildlife, on the global climate, and on local health and safety. In 2013, a small plane crashed into a house there and killed two neighborhood children. On a daily basis, pollution and traffic infect the community.

“Over time, pavement could also dry up the creek, or parts of it,” O’Brien warns. At a public hearing, Herrera insisted that the “wetlands are a sponge,” demonstrating with an actual sponge. A CEO grabbed it out of her hands, according to O’Brien, “Yet we’re the people characterized as being wild and dangerous.”

The above-mentioned newspaper columnist has called opposition to the airport “madness” and expressed a wish that the state could “just fill in” the creek.

Stop Tweed spreads a different vision, one of neighborhood sovereignty and sustainability.

“My approach is that the people closest to the problem and the people most affected by the problem have an incredibly powerful and potent lens,” says Herrera. “I think economic growth is an entirely too narrow lens to look at human thriving.”

Airport authorities, backed by New Haven’s progressive Democratic mayor, Toni Harp, are now attempting again to expand the runway.

Tweed's Airport Authority and Connecticut's Airport Authority have been pursuing a partnership, signaling intentions to expand. The struggle against Tweed may enter a new phase.

Asked what he thinks about applying some of the direct action tactics used by France's anti-airport Zone à Défendre (ZAD) blockade, O'Brien says he hasn't ruled out the possibility, "I try to bring anarchist principles to all of my work, and adjust strategies appropriately for the situation. A lot of it depends on the coalition of people I'm working with. In April and May [of 2018], standing on tables, being loud, and walking out of meetings helped to get the press attention we needed to effectively counteract the Tweed machine. Next time, who knows what will work best?"

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