



Meigs Field – Even better than a “No Fly Zone” for Chicago



Meigs Field controllers provide positive air traffic control over all flights within a 4.5 mile radius of downtown Chicago.

Recent statements by City of Chicago officials and local Chicago news editorials have called for the banning of Visual Flight Rules (VFR) airplane traffic in the vicinity of downtown Chicago. These statements are misinformed at best, and fear mongering at worst.

The fact is that Meigs Field already provides effectively the same safeguards as have been called for, without the unnecessary and potentially risky “no fly zone” proposed for a 5 mile radius of downtown Chicago.

Background

The call for a ban on VFR flights around downtown Chicago stems from concern over the fact that VFR flights typically are conducted on the pilot’s own recognizance, without filing an official flight plan or staying in touch with Air Traffic Control at all times, like Instrument Flight Rules (IFR) flights do.

VFR flights operate on the same model as other forms of personal transportation (cars, trucks, motorcycles, bicycles, walking, etc.) in which the public is free to conduct its business without government interference or control over freedom of movement and travel.

IFR flights, on the other hand, require assistance, guidance and direction from an external source because in instrument meteorological conditions (bad weather, or IMC for short), pilots cannot see and avoid other aircraft.

A Moot Question

Whether concern over unfettered VFR flight is warranted or not, the question is moot in downtown Chicago.

The reason for this is the existence of a special type of airspace defined around airports such as Meigs Field, known as Class D airspace.

Whenever there is an operating control tower at a field like Meigs, all aircraft—VFR as well as IFR, with only minor and inconsequential exceptions—must be in contact with the air traffic controllers in the control tower.

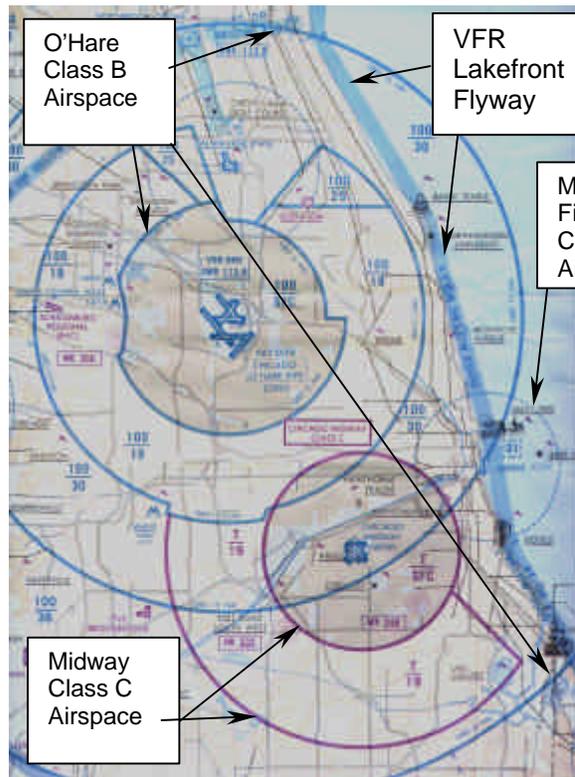
Aircraft entering this airspace must identify themselves, they type of aircraft they are, and their requested intentions. Only after receiving clearance from the Meigs Field control tower may they enter the Class D airspace.

Moreover, because of the existence of O’Hare Airport’s Class B airspace—which arches out far over Lake Michigan, stretching over the top of Meigs’ Class D, all aircraft in the area must have a radar transponder that displays their location, speed, and altitude. This information is available to

the controllers in the Meigs control tower on a radar-like display called a TARDIS (Terminal Area Radar Display and Information System.)

In other words, with Meigs Field operating, it requires the same information for all aircraft entering downtown Chicago's airspace, IFR and VFR. The stated reason for wanting to ban VFR flights from downtown, therefore becomes moot.

Meigs' Class D Airspace Configuration



Meigs' Class D airspace stretches 4 nautical miles (about 4.5 statute miles) in all directions, from the surface up to 3,100 feet above sea level (or about 2,500 feet above the surface.) This airspace includes all downtown buildings, including the Sears Tower, the John Hancock Building and the AON building, Navy Pier, all downtown tourist attractions, Comiskey Park, Soldier Field, and the East Crib water intake off of Monroe Street Harbor. It extends as far north as North Avenue Beach and as far south as the Museum of Science and Industry.

On the chart at left, the airspace is indicated by the dashed blue circle around Meigs Field (arrow.)

The temporary flight restriction requested by the City of Chicago (and supported by the Tribune) would essentially have mimicked this airspace, but would have prevented any VFR flights from entering this airspace legally.

It would not, of course, have prevented any action by zealots bent on mass murder, who clearly would have no regard for airspace rules and regulations.

It would, however, have put law-abiding citizens at risk of life and property.

Too Far Over the Lake

O'Hare's Class B airspace extends almost 30 miles, far out over Lake Michigan, acting as an effective roof or ceiling above which VFR traffic typically cannot get clearance to climb. At the same time, O'Hare's Class B and Midway's Class C airspace extend to the ground at the innermost diameters, creating an effective wall, west of which VFR traffic usually cannot get clearance to pass.

This means that many, many VFR flights are concentrated in a "flyway" along the Lake Michigan shoreline (shown above.) The majority of these aircraft are neither heading to nor from Meigs Field. They are simply passing through the airspace en route to and from other airports.

A significant number of these aircraft are single engine craft, which typically are constrained to stay within gliding distance of the shoreline, in case of mechanical difficulties.



TFR granted by FAA

If the FAA had granted the 5 mile “VFR No Fly Zone” requested by the City and the Tribune, these aircraft would have been forced to fly miles out over Lake Michigan, playing a dangerous game of “You Bet Your Life,” or required to fly 50 or more miles out of their way around the western side of O’Hare’s airspace.

The FAA’s compromise solution was to grant a smaller, limited TFR only over downtown Chicago itself.

The illustration above depicts the new, Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR) granted by the FAA to the City of Chicago. As can be seen, it is far smaller than Meigs’ Class D airspace, and is almost entirely contained within the Class D, providing almost no additional advantage over Meigs’ existing restrictions.

Moreover, as the TFR is, by definition, temporary, (and there is no precedent for any such permanent urban restricted area,) it is likely that at some point in the future, the TFR will no longer exist.

Meigs Field, however, will continue to provide the same “protection” for downtown Chicago, as long as it is allowed to function.

This is just one more argument why an operating Meigs Field is far more valuable to Chicago than a closed one.

For more information

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