

# Burlington, Vermont, Says ‘No’ to F-35s, Setting Off a Chain Reaction

Tuesday, May 15, 2018 By [James Marc Leas](#), Truthout | News Analysis, Reprinted with [permission](#)

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/44482-burlington-vermont-says-no-to-f-35s-in-its-community-setting-off-a-chain-reaction>

*(Don Chapin interjection: I was a civil servant Systems Engineer working on the very first development of the F-35. A standard contractor mantra was to involve companies in each and every state, whether “qualified” to make the part(s) they were to be making, or not, as manufacturing teams would travel to these future manufacturers to coach them to become qualified. The reason was to obtain maximum Congressional support via local jobs. Result was an overpriced, difficult-to-design and manufacture fault-free product when the emphasis is more on politics, than quality.)*



Politicians and developers are pushing for the F-35s over the objections of citizens who will be affected by them. *(Note my interjection, above ~ Don Chapin)* (Photo: [Robert Sullivan / Flickr](#))

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The F-35 fighter bomber is screamingly loud. The US Air Force also says that the F-35 has a high crash rate. A [Naval Air Warfare Center Weapons Division](#) report describes releases of toxic, carcinogenic and mutagenic chemicals, particulates and fibers during combustion of a military carbon composite aircraft body, making the consequences of an F-35 crash in a city catastrophic.

A proposal to base 18 F-35 fighter bombers at the city-owned airport in Burlington, Vermont, would put nearly 3,000 small working-class homes in a noise danger zone that the [2013 US Air Force Environmental Impact Statement](#) (EIS) says will impair children's learning and cognitive development.

Notwithstanding lockstep support by the Vermont political and commercial establishment, the plan to base the fighter bombers in Burlington was shaken up in March when citizens voted to cancel the basing. While the vote was a major step toward revoking the plan, a bit more than a democratic vote of the people may be needed in view of the enthusiasm for F-35 basing that Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger, US Sen. Patrick Leahy and commercial real estate developers continue to display, notwithstanding the serious harm the basing will impose on thousands of families.

## Impacts of F-35s on Residents

The airport is located in the most densely populated part of Vermont -- [124,000 people live in seven towns and cities within five miles](#). Although owned by the City of Burlington, the airport is located entirely within the city limits of South Burlington. About 1,000 small, single-family homes and an elementary school are close, and they are blasted by the noise of groups of F-16 jets taking off twice a day. The runway aims directly at the center of Winooski, an ethnically diverse working-class city [where more than 20 languages are spoken](#), just one mile away, and the F-16s fly low over the city on takeoff. Burlington itself is mostly far enough to the side of the runway so only small portions are heavily affected by F-16 noise.

A map in the Air Force EIS indicates that the F-35 taking off in normal military power with its afterburner off is almost as loud as the F-16 taking off with its afterburner blasting. When an afterburner is engaged, [fuel is injected into the exhaust](#) stream to increase the temperature and speed of the exhaust as it leaves the tailpipe nozzle, significantly increasing thrust. Unfortunately for people and animals in the flight path, the afterburner also vastly increases the noise level. The EIS says that a person on the ground below will be hit with 115 decibels when the F-35 is at 1,000-foot elevation on takeoff with its afterburner off.

But even 115 decibels is a sound level [above the threshold of pain](#). To avoid permanent hearing loss, the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) says that a worker may

be exposed to 115 decibels for [no more than 28 seconds](#). The NIOSH [recommends that protective measures](#) be taken at the much lower 85 decibels sound level.

Damage to children from aircraft noise was acknowledged in the Air Force EIS, which states:

Several studies suggest that aircraft noise can affect the academic performance of schoolchildren ... tasks involving central processing and language comprehension (such as reading, attention, problem solving, and memory) appear to be the most affected by noise ... there is increasing awareness that chronic exposure to high aircraft noise levels may impair learning. This awareness has led the [World Health Organization] and a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) working group to conclude that daycare centers and schools should not be located near major sources of noise, such as highways, airports, and industrial sites.

The [US Air Force EIS](#) provided data showing that the 18 F-16 aircraft currently based at the airport have had "disproportionate impact" on low-income populations and residents of color that would continue or increase under the F-35. For example, a table in the US Air Force EIS reports 2010 Census data showing that heavily impacted Winooski is 17.4 percent non-white and 24.6 percent low income. By contrast, none of the wealthy neighborhoods in Burlington or South Burlington are shown on Air Force EIS maps as being impacted by F-16 or F-35 noise.

## **Citizens Fight an Uphill Battle Over F-35 Basing**

In Burlington, the democratic process opposing the F-35 fighter bombers faced multiple obstacles. First, despite sub-zero temperatures, petitioners unexpectedly succeeded in collecting 1,800 valid signatures of registered voters by the January 18 deadline to put a resolution calling for cancelation of the plan on the ballot for a vote on March 6.

The [ballot item](#) asked for a yes or no vote:

Shall we, the voters of the City of Burlington, as part of our strong support for the men and women of the Vermont National Guard, and especially their mission to 'protect the citizens of Vermont,' advise the City Council to:

1. Request the cancellation of the planned basing of the F-35 at Burlington International Airport, and
2. Request instead low-noise-level equipment with a proven high safety record appropriate for a densely populated area?

By a vote of 6,482 (55.3 percent) to 5,238 (44.7 percent), the citizens of Burlington voted in favor of canceling the basing. The vote was a bit of shock, coming in the face of unanimous support for F-35 basing by Vermont's entire political establishment, including Senators Patrick Leahy and Bernie Sanders, Congressman Peter Welch, the governor, the mayor, the Chamber of Commerce, the Business Round Table and real estate developers who had figured out how to [turn dangerous F-35 noise into money for themselves](#).

A massive advertising campaign, [much of it paid for by prominent real estate developer Ernie Pomerleau](#), flooded newspapers, social media and [airwaves](#). [Uniformed Vermont National Guard](#) commanders intervened with [on-base news conferences](#). Signs [attacking the resolution](#) saying, "[If you truly support the Guard vote no on 6](#)," were planted, lining major streets in the city.

To counter the attack, grassroots health and safety activists implemented a [social media](#) and [print media campaign](#) that featured [satire](#), [full-page ads](#) and [a couple](#) of [opinion pieces](#) in the local daily newspaper.

In a boost to the campaign, [seven local state legislators signed on to a letter](#) calling on the public to vote "yes" to request cancellation of the F-35s. The letter cited noise and crash danger from the F-35 and the availability of alternative missions for the Vermont Air Guard if the F-35 basing is cancelled.

But the highlight was a demonstration of the outrageously loud 115-decibel sound level of the F-35 organized by Ben and Jerry's activist co-founder Ben Cohen in March. A stadium-sized [sound system mounted on a trailer led by Cohen](#) drove with sign-bedecked vehicles through the streets of Burlington. As widely reported, Burlington police arrested, handcuffed and jailed Cohen and two others for violating the city's noise ordinance as they demonstrated the sound of an F-35 taking off in front of city hall. The arrests constituted tacit admission by city officials that the deafening noise level produced by the F-35 was illegal.

"You can't have it both ways. If the sound is illegal -- if you're going to arrest us for it -- they should arrest the [Burlington] City Council that is inflicting this noise on 6,600 people," Cohen [told a reporter](#) just before being arrested.

The campaign to cancel the F-35s and the resulting citizens' vote against the basing proved to be a catalyst for three city councils to take up the matter.

## **Three City Councils Vote to Cancel F-35 Basing**

Burlington council member Joan Shannon was council president in 2013 and had [led the council in supporting F-35 basing](#) back then. But immediately after voters approved the resolution to cancel the F-35 in 2018, [Shannon prepared and circulated a resolution](#) generally respecting the will of the voters. The resolution called on the secretary of the US Air Force "to replace the planned basing of the F-35 with a basing of a low-noise-level plane with a proven high safety record." The resolution also included questions for the Air Force on several hot topics: F-35 crash risk in a densely populated area, F-35 noise level, F-35 use of its afterburner, and availability of an alternative plane for the Vermont Air National Guard if the F-35 basing was cancelled.

Although the Lake Champlain Regional Chamber of Commerce [mobilized its members to lobby councilors to support F-35 basing](#) at the Burlington city council meeting on March 26, the [council adopted Shannon's resolution 9-3](#).

Though Burlington's pro-F-35 Mayor Miro Weinberger did send the resolution to Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson two weeks later, he included a cover letter rejecting the will of the city's voters, instead supporting F-35 basing in Burlington and disparaging the town meeting vote and council resolution. (A real estate developer himself, Weinberger and his administration appear to have conflicts of interest regarding 44 acres of commercially valuable land facing the airport entrance. As [Truthout previously reported](#), the city acquired that land for free with grants from the Federal Aviation Administration to purchase and demolish 200 small working-class homes.)

Meanwhile, neighboring Winooski and South Burlington are the cities currently most harmed by F-16 noise, and they will be even more harmed by F-35 noise.

On April 16, the City Council of Winooski voted unanimously and [the City Council of South Burlington](#) voted 3 to 1 to adopt their own resolutions calling on the secretary of the Air Force to cancel the planned basing of the F-35 and instead provide low-noise-level equipment with a proven high-safety record. Passage of the [Winooski and the South Burlington city council resolutions](#), adding to the town meeting vote in Burlington and its city council vote, shredded any remaining claim of public support for F-35 basing.

The citizens' vote in Burlington, and the subsequent votes by the three city councils, is built on seven years of visible public actions. Activists had organized large demonstrations, public meetings, mass marches and rallies. They had initiated two lawsuits and published dozens of articles -- all to get out the message of severe danger to children and elderly in local communities.

Though judges ruled against them in both F-35 lawsuits, discovery in the federal case produced a trove of Air Force documents that revealed government misconduct in decisions leading up to the Air Force selecting Burlington for F-35 basing. Those documents helped demolish the case for basing the jets and contributed to the town meeting and city council vote results. Among the thousands of pages released were documents showing [pressure](#) applied by US Sen. Patrick Leahy on the Air Force chief of staff.

If Vermont elites press on anyway and succeed in pressuring the Air Force to push the F-35s on a non-consenting and unwilling public, a crisis of democracy will be added to the lack of legitimacy created by impairing health, safety, children, learning, schools and affordable housing, and for disproportionately impacting low-income residents and people of color while engaging in government misconduct.

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## [James Marc Leas](#)

James Marc Leas is a patent lawyer in South Burlington, Vermont. He helped collect signatures on petitions for the Burlington ballot item campaign and participated in the demonstration of the sound level of the F-35 through the streets of Burlington.

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