

# F1 girding for rash of copter traffic

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As many as a thousand Formula One fans will use helicopters to reach the Circuit of the Americas each day for November's inaugural Grand Prix event here, officials estimate, with each of them paying more than \$500 for what is likely to be a brief trip to and from the track.

That unusual mode of travel for a Central Texas sporting event has required track organizers to bring on aviation partners familiar with handling reservations and scheduling for hundreds of helicopter flights during each of the three days of racing, and to work with city and federal officials on flight rules and routes for the copters.

The Federal Aviation Administration, the agency in charge of air traffic controllers, will give special training to a few controllers before the Nov. 16-18 event, spokesman Lynn Lunsford said, and at all times will have a controller at the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport control tower assigned to monitor and talk with the helicopter pilots.

And the agency has designated what at this point are still preliminary routes between the circuit and a half-dozen or more sites where passengers will board the helicopters. Those routes by and large follow expressways and areas with little or no development, Lunsford said.

According to the FAA map, and a company hired by the circuit to take reservations and work with helicopter charter companies, there probably will be helipads at Austin-Bergstrom, Austin Executive Airport near Manor, San Marcos Municipal Airport and Georgetown Municipal Airport, as well as two at or near downtown Austin. The specific sites at Austin-Bergstrom and downtown have not been finalized, officials said, although the FAA map does show a helipad somewhere within Zilker Park.

City Parks and Recreation Department special events coordinator Jason Maurer said the department has received a request from a charter operator to use the "Stratford field," the flat area between the Zilker Botanical Garden and Lady Bird Lake. That proposal is being evaluated, Maurer said.

Despite the blizzard of rotor-powered machinery in the sky during that weekend, as well as a spike in private and charter airplanes arriving here for the racing, officials said the two modes of aircraft will not be in each other's way.

Passenger and corporate jets, Lunsford said, gain altitude quickly upon takeoff, while the helicopters by and large will be cruising at 500 to 1,000 feet above the ground.

"The airliners are a thousand feet in the air before they even get off the (Austin-Bergstrom) airport property," Lunsford said. As for the helicopters going between Austin-Bergstrom and the track property about three miles to the southeast, he said those aircraft probably will be routed over the center of the airport property where planes are still on the east runway.

Race organizers expect up to 120,000 spectators on Sunday, race day, with smaller but still significant crowds on Friday and Saturday, when the cars will be doing practice runs and then qualifying for Sunday starting positions.

Unlike football, baseball and other mainstream American sports, where almost all fans get to the stadium or arena via automobile, train or on foot, auto racing historically has had a notable percentage of better-heeled spectators who avoid the traffic by using helicopters. City of Austin officials who in early July attended the F1 race in Silverstone, England, about an hour outside of London, said the number of copters was startling.

"For several hours, I saw seven or eight helicopters in the pattern at all times," Austin Police Chief Art Acevedo said. "It was constant."

Officials expect something less than that here, given the state of the national economy and the circuit's more convenient location. The track site near Elroy is about 12 miles from the Capitol. The overwhelming majority of fans will still get to the Circuit using cars or the bus shuttles that race organizers will run from downtown, the Travis County Expo Center and a to-be-determined third site.

But the helicopter traffic will still be significant. The circuit, now under construction, will include a helicopter landing site on an elevated area just east of Turn 1 that will have at least six helipads.

Steve Henry, owner of Fort Worth-based Henry Aviation, has been hired by Circuit of the Americas to run that helicopter operation. Henry, who handles helicopter operations for Texas Motor Speedway's NASCAR races and a number of other races around the country on the stock car circuit, expects up to 20 charter helicopters to be involved that weekend.

Julie Loignon, spokeswoman for Circuit of the Americas, said officials believe there will be 40 to 50 helicopter landings per hour at the busiest point.

Henry will charge the owners of each of those aircraft a one-time \$1,600 fee for the right to land and take off from the race site's helipads throughout that weekend.

Most of those helicopter charters, and most of the fans who want to take a helicopter to the track, will work with Charlie Bravo Aviation, a Georgetown company that the circuit designated as the preferred helicopter broker. Although some who own their own helicopters might work directly with Henry, the circuit will direct most people to Charlie Bravo, which will then schedule them on particular charter helicopters.

Rene Banglesdorf, chief executive officer of Charlie Bravo, said each passenger will pay \$545 per day for a round trip between one of the helipad bases and the circuit. Most if not all of the charter operators themselves, she said, probably will come from Texas because of the expense of flying helicopters to the Austin area at \$3,000 an hour or more.

She said the typical helicopter to be used during the race will accommodate five passengers, although there could be some larger craft involved carrying a dozen or more. And there will be at least a few flights coming from locations other than the airport and downtown helipads.

"There are a couple of celebrities staying at area ranches," she said. "We will fly in and get them at the ranch, and take them to the track."

The flights, wherever they come from, should last five minutes or less, Banglesdorf said.

Just as with car and bus traffic, Banglesdorf said, the real crunch will begin after the checkered flag. Getting out a thousand passengers five to 10 at a time, with a helicopter taking off every minute or so, could take a couple of hours.

"Leaving after the race on Sunday, it's going to be a challenge to accommodate all those passengers in a timely fashion," she said. "We're talking about having some sort of entertainment or hospitality" at the helipad area.

Like everything else about this first year of the race, gauging the level of helicopter traffic and accommodating it properly will be a work in progress.

"We're not anticipating the same level of (helicopter) activity as Silverstone has," said Loignon, the circuit spokeswoman. "But we won't know until we have at least one year under our belts."

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