



Patrick Leahy
United States Senator for Vermont

Thank you for contacting me about basing the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter in South Burlington. I have heard from Vermonters who have questions about aircraft noise, housing values, and the general need for the F-35, and where I stand on these issues. I appreciate hearing from you and am happy to share my position with you.

Peoples' concerns about noise levels are understandable. I am, however, concerned that some fears have become exaggerated during the debate. The draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) released in March states that the F-35 would be louder than the F-16, but Vermont's former Adjutant General Michael Dubie has stated that the F-35 will not be as loud as the F-4s that flew out of Burlington International Airport regularly during the 1980s. The EIS's projected noise impact does not account for any efforts by the Guard to reduce noise from the new jet, and the impacts of noise mitigation procedures implemented by the Vermont Air Guard have significantly limited the noise footprint of the F-16. Both the Air Force and the Vermont Air National Guard have committed to implement aggressive noise abatement policies for the F-35, and based on the record of noise abatement with the F-16, I believe those procedures will similarly limit the F-35 noise impacts.

I take very seriously Vermonters' concerns that aircraft noise could hurt property values or make a home "unmortgageable." However, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has confirmed that F-35 projected noise levels will not result in any homes being denied a mortgage. In fact, HUD's property appraisal rules specifically state that a mortgage cannot be denied because of airport noise. A summary of studies included in the EIS, as well as another study conducted by the Greater Burlington Industrial Corporation (GBIC), suggest that noise may be a contributing, but is not a primary or predominant, factor in property valuation. The EIS describes several contradictory reports, some suggesting downward value trends and others suggesting no negative impact or even positive impacts due to the commercial development resulting from the proximity to an airport. The GBIC report, which evaluated the sales price of properties near the Burlington Airport over the past decade, shows no direct relationship between increased noise and reduced home values. In fact, the GBIC report found that home prices within the airports 65 Day-Night Noise Level (DNL) have followed the market trend in Chittenden County as a whole. I have not yet seen any new evidence that would contradict the study's conclusions.

Of course, I have heard from a number of Vermonters who have questioned whether our country needs the F-35 at all. Throughout my Senate career, I have always opposed any new rush to war. I strongly opposed the use of military force in Iraq, and continue to be gravely concerned about our involvement in Afghanistan. But I also believe that the United States must be able to defend itself. One part of our defensive capability must be the ability to defeat aerial threats with an effective fleet of fighter jets. Whether the F-35 is the right new jet to comprise our future fighter fleet remains an open question. But the question we face today is where the F-35, if purchased, will eventually be based. Regardless of the Air Force's basing decisions, I will continue to look for ways to diversify our fighter fleet and rein in defense spending.

The Air Force has identified Burlington International Airport as a potential base for the F-35 because it does not require modification to support F-35 operations, is adjacent to a large airspace suitable for subsonic flight training, and is positioned near several major cities along the eastern seaboard. Vermont's 158th Fighter Wing is of outstanding and proven ability, and in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, scrambled many of their F-16s in protective missions. For 122 days, the unit provided continuous air patrols over Washington, D.C., and New York City. No Air Force unit did more than the Vermont Guard to reestablish control of our skies after that awful day. For that reason and the many reasons described by the EIS, we cannot dismiss Vermont's role in the future of our air security.

I am not willing to sacrifice any Vermont community for a new fighter jet. I have worked to obtain federal funds for community investments in both South Burlington and Winooski, and I would never support a new program that would harm those communities. I would strongly oppose basing the F-35 in Vermont if I believed its noise would make Winooski or South Burlington unlivable. But I do not believe that will be the case. Vermont can be a responsible contributor to our national security and continue to have vibrant surrounding communities. In fact, I believe the F-35 will, on the whole, make our local communities *more* vibrant through increased investment. Certainly, in a time of shrinking federal budgets, the reduction or closure of the Burlington Air Guard Station is not implausible. While I do not consider the F-35 a jobs program, I cannot ignore what possible impacts a base closure might have on South Burlington and Winooski. I believe we need more investment in our local communities, not less.

Thank you for contacting me about my position on the F-35. Like you, I am committed to the high quality of life we cherish in Vermont. I am also committed to maintaining our well-established National Guard. These are both in the interest of Vermonters, and I will not stop working until we have arrived at a solution that achieves both outcomes.

Sincerely,
PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator