Chapter 7

The Use of Noise Measurements

Noise Calculations Are Best For HUD Use

There are two ways to determine noise levels for a site under review: the noise can be calculated or it can be measured. While one's first reaction might well be that it would obviously be better to go out and actually measure the noise levels at the site, calculated noise levels are really much better for implementing HUD's noise policy.

Calculated noise levels are developed using mathematical models that contain a variety of assumptions about the process of noise propagation as well as data on sound levels generated by typical sources (i.e. aircraft engines, automobile tires etc.). The model can be a complex computer model or it can be a simple desktop model such as the procedures in the *Noise Assessment Guidelines*. The models can also employ a variety of noise descriptors. (See chapter 1 for a discussion of noise descriptors.) Most noise studies done for the Federal Highway Administration, for example, use either the L_{10} or the L_{eq} noise descriptor. Many aircraft noise studies use the NEF or CNEL descriptor. All of these descriptors are compatible with the L_{dn} noise descriptor system that is preferred by HUD and the HUD noise regulation contains instructions for converting all of them into L_{dn}. (sections 51.106(a)(1) and (2))

Whether produced by a sophisticated computer model or by the desktop *Noise Assessment Guidelines*, calculated noise levels are more useful for HUD needs than measured levels for two significant reasons: The first is that with noise measurements you have no good way to take into account future changes in the future noise environment. The houses we help build today are going to be around for a long time and it is very important that we determine, to the extent we can, the noise environment that will exist throughout the life of the buildings. While there are clearly limitations on how far into the future we can reasonably project traffic levels for roads, railroads and airports, we can at least look 5 to 10 years ahead. The HUD noise regulation (24 CFR 51B) requires that "to the extent possible, noise exposure shall be projected to be representative of conditions that are expected to exist at a time at least 10 years beyond the date of the project or action under review." It is very easy to make these projections if you use the *Noise Assessment Guidelines* or a computer model to determine noise levels.

The second reason why we prefer that you calculate noise levels is that through the calculation process you can use monthly or yearly data to determine traffic levels. Thus you come up with a more typical picture of conditions. With noise measurements there is always the possibility that the day or even days chosen for measurements will not be typical and that the measurements may over or understate the problem. While the conscientious measurer will try to account for any unusual conditions, it isn't always possible. So long as cost considerations limit the number of days that measurements can be taken there will always be the problem of unrepresentative data. With calculations this isn't a problem. The computer model that generates contours for airports, for example, uses an entire years data to develop the average day. Certainly the results are more likely to be representative than the results that would be derived from just a few days measurements.

When Noise Measurements Are Useful

While it is the preferred procedure to calculate noise levels, there are a few situations where the noise models might not be accurate and it might be better to rely on measurements. One instance would be when there is insufficient or inadequate traffic data. Another case might be where you have a unique physical situation that is not accounted for in whatever mathematical model is available.

Obtaining good traffic data can be difficult. You may only be able to get gross data that simply lists total vehicles without making any distinctions between trucks and automobiles. Or you may not be able to get any reliable data on the percentage of traffic between 10 pm and 7 am. While the *Noise Assessment Guidelines* do contain some assumptions that you can use when you don't have all the data you need, there may be instances when you just don't think those assumptions would accurately portray the problem.

By the same token, there are certain physical situations that mathematical models such as the *Noise Assessment Guidelines* couldn't anticipate and therefore do not reflect in their formulas. For example, the *Guidelines* say that you don't have to calculate the noise levels for underground transit lines. Well what if the line is underground but there are large air vents that reach from the belowground tunnels to the surface? A great deal of noise can reach the surface through these vents but the *Noise Assessment Guidelines* don't have any way to take it into account. You couldn't treat it as if the subway line were aboveground because it isn't really and at least some of the noise is blocked. This would be a case where a noise measurement would probably be the best way to determine the noise levels. By the same token, the guidelines do not really take into account the sometimes significant amounts of reflected noise that can occur at urban sites surrounded by tall buildings, i.e. the canyon effect.

When Not to Use Measurements

One thing noise measurements should not be used for is to confirm or refute calculated noise levels, especially computer generated aircraft contours. Our experience with both the *Noise Assessment Guidelines* and with computer noise models is that both are quite accurate if done properly. If you are convinced that the calculations were done correctly, and if you believe that the data used were good, you should strongly discourage anyone who wants to take measurements because they think that measurements are inherently more accurate than calculations. Comparing measured noise levels to calculated levels is like comparing apples and oranges. The calculated noise levels should include projected traffic levels, the measured ones will not. The calculated levels will be based on daily traffic counts derived by averaging months of data, the measured levels will, at best, reflect just a few days. (This is particularly true for aircraft noise contours. The day-to-day operations of an airport can vary significantly depending upon weather conditions and any one or two days worth of measurements are very likely to show different levels from those generated by a computer model employing a year of data to derive an average day.)

If you have determined that noise measurements are appropriate, you must make sure that they are done properly, otherwise the data will be useless. There are four elements to proper measurements: 1) where the measurements are taken; 2) when they are taken; 3) the type of equipment used; and 4) the actual measurement procedure.

Where measurements should be taken: The locations for noise measurements should be selected using the same criteria you would use to select a Noise Assessment Location for a *Noise Assessment Guidelines* calculation. The *Noise Assessment Guidelines* recommend that "assessments of the noise exposure should be made at representative locations around the site where significant noise is expected." Further, the *Guidelines* state that when selecting these locations you should consider those buildings containing noise sensitive uses which are closest to the predominant noise sources. Where quiet outdoor space is desired at a site, you should also select points in the outdoor area in question. Specifically, the "relevant measurement location for buildings is a point 2 meters (6.5 feet) from the facade." If there are no buildings yet the measurement point should be 2 meters from the closest point setback requirements would allow a building facade.

When measurements should be taken: Because measurements are only going to be taken for a few days at best, special care should be taken to make sure that the days selected are representative of average traffic levels. For highways, avoid both Monday and Friday, particularly before or after a holiday. In fact holiday periods, such as the Christmas/New Years season, should be avoided entirely. Highway traffic, or rather more importantly, truck traffic is likely to be down during these periods and noise levels may be significantly lower than normal. On the other hand, holiday periods are often peak travel periods for airlines and measurements taken around airports then would show unusually high noise levels.

Whoever is taking the measurements should also check to make sure that there aren't any special circumstances that might affect traffic levels. For example road construction or repair work might divert additonal traffic onto the road being measured, or divert traffic away. In both cases the noise levels measured would not be representative.

And finally, noise measurements should not be taken during extreme weather conditions both because of the possible effects on traffic levels but also because the weather conditions can exaggerate the actual noise levels.

Ideally, noise measurements should be taken over several days spread over at least a few months. But given that time and money will normally preclude this, at least make sure the one or two days you can get are as close to typical as possible.

What equipment to use: There are many sound level meters on the market which are suitable for taking noise measurements for transportation sources. They need only to meet the requirements of American National Standard Specification for Type 1 Sound Level Meters: S1.4-1971. Type 1 sound level meters are "precision" meters and provide the most accurate measurements. They are also, of course, the most expensive. Fast time-averaging and A frequency weighting are to be used. The sound level meter with the A-weighting is progressively less sensitive to sound with frequencies below 1,000 hertz, somewhat as is the ear. With fast time averaging the sound level meter responds particularly to recent sounds almost as quickly as does the ear in judging the loudness of a sound. Fast time averaging has a time constant of about 1/8 second.

While a sound level measuring system that averages decibel readouts on a short term basis such as for every minute or every hour is acceptable, it would be far better if a system that actually provides a 24 hour integrated L_{dn} readout were used. Such a system eliminates the need for calculating the L_{dn} value, an area where many inexperienced consultants go astray. These systems are more expensive however, and the consultant who doesn't do much noise work is unlikely to have one.

Measurement procedures: Detailed procedures for making sound level measurements are spelled out in the American National Standards Institute's Standard Methods ANSI S1.2-1962(R1976) *American National Standard Method for the Physical Measurement of Sound* and ANSI S1.13-1971(R1976) *American National Standard Methods for the Measurement of Sound Pressure Levels.*

Some of the basic procedures that should be followed are:

1. Measurements should normally be made over a continuous 24 hour period. If this is not possible, measurements may be made over a period of days but still must cover the entire 24 hour period. The selection of the days becomes even more critical so that they are as similar as possible. Sampling is not acceptable.
2. The sound level meter must be calibrated before each use.
3. The sound level meter should be provided with a wind screen.
4. Care should be taken to insure that there are no temporary obstructions, such as parked trucks, between the meter and the source.

The Noise Study

The noise study prepared to describe the measurement results should contain at least the following:

1. A map showing where the measurements were taken
2. A vicinity map showing the site and the major noise sources
3. A chart indicating the date, the time, and weather conditions when measurements were taken at each measurement location
4. The type of microphone used
5. Any variations from ANSI procedures
6. The results of the measurements in L_{dn} for each measurement location
7. Any unusual conditions that existed during the measurement period—i.e. construction activity, major traffic tieup, etc.
8. If an integrating sound level meter was not used, the calculations used to derive the L_{dn} value.

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