ZDCARTCC
WASHINGTON DC

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

WASHINGTON ATCT

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January 13 2026
vZDC-DCA-P-01D

VIRTUAL AIR TRAFFIC SIMULATION NETWORK
VATUSA DIVISION – WASHINGTON ARTCC

ORDER
vZDC-DCA-P-01D

SUBJ: vZDC-DCA-P-01D, effective January 13, 2025

This order provides direction and guidance for the day-to-day operations of the Washington Air Traffic Control Tower (DCA ATCT) on the Virtual Air Traffic Simulation Network (VATSIM) and prescribes air traffic control procedures and phraseology. Controllers are required to be familiar with the provisions of these procedures.

This document is only to be used in a simulated environment. This document shall not be referenced or utilized in live operations in the National Airspace System (NAS). The Virtual Washington ARTCC (vZDC), VATUSA, and VATSIM do not take any responsibility for uses of this order outside of the simulation environment.

Justin R. McElvaney
Air Traffic Manager
Virtual Washington ARTCC

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. General

Section 1. Introduction

1–1–1. PURPOSE OF THIS ORDER

This order describes the airspace structure, procedures, and relevant control-related policy for all controllers working an operational DCA ATCT position on the VATSIM network.

1–1–2. AUDIENCE

This order applies to all vZDC controllers and any non-assigned (i.e., visiting) controller receiving training from the vZDC Training Department to work at any facility or airspace delegated to vZDC.

1–1–3. WHERE TO FIND THIS ORDER

This order is available on the vZDC web site at https://www.vzdc.org/publications/downloads under the Publications tab.

1–1–4. WHAT THIS ORDER CANCELS

This order cancels vZDC DCA ATCT 7110.65C, dated 1 July 2024.

1–1–5. EXPLANATION OF CHANGES

This change introduces the new SOP formatting across the ARTCC along with updated information, diagrams, and providing clarity in certain areas not covered in the previous version. Expanded Helicopter Local (HC) guidance is introduced. Inclusion of the IDS for submitted departure release requests to TMU procedure are added. Incorporation of tower assumed radar identification procedures to the Local Control section was made. Other general corrections and adjustments for overall publication alignment across all vZDC facilities were made.

1–1–6. DENOTATION OF CHANGES

Changes are indicated via the use of the shading tool. The changed text is highlighted in grey to indicate a change. No indication is made where text was removed from the document. Grammatical revisions and other changes to improve readability without changes in policy will not be marked.

EXAMPLE –
Changed or added text is highlighted in grey.

1–1–7. HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

a. This document is organized by chapters. The first two chapters are general information, while subsequent chapters define procedures for each position in the cab.

b. The use of hyperlinks throughout this publication is configured to provide quick access to often needed pieces of information. In addition to standard document reference hyperlinks, the

use of quick link “buttons” is used throughout. Boxed and/or shaded content indicates a shortcut may be linked.

c. The grid on page one of this document (also accessible by clicking the “DCA” box at the top left of the SOP document) is an abbreviated table of contents with hyperlinked content for quick access to commonly referenced materials.

EXAMPLE –

DCA

Section 2. Terms of Reference

1–2–1. WORD AND TERM MEANINGS

a. Arrivals. Refers specifically to arriving aircraft on an IFR flight plan.

b. Delegated Airspace. The airspace that is assigned to a specific sector or position within an individual facility.

c. Departures. Refers specifically to departing aircraft on an IFR flight plan.

d. VFR Arrival. Referring to an aircraft arriving to the airport under VFR.

e. VFR Departure. Refers to an aircraft departing from the airport under VFR.

1–2–2. ABBREVIATIONS

a. ATAP. Automated Terminal Proximity Alert.

b. AOA. At or above.

c. AOB. At or below.

d. ATCT. Air Traffic Control Tower.

e. ATIS. Automated Terminal Information Service.

f. CHP. Refers to the “Chesapeake Area” of Potomac TRACON.

g. CRC. Consolidated Radar Client.

h. FRZ. Flight Restriction Zone.

i. PCT. Potomac TRACON; applying to the entirety of the facility.

j. SFRA. Special Flight Rules Area.

k. SOP. Standard Operating Procedures.

l. STARS. Standard Terminal Automation Replacement System. STARS is the terminal control radar software component of vNAS and CRC.

m. TDLS. Tower Data-link System.

n. vNAS. Virtual National Airspace System. vNAS is the collective total of all systems and components that make up the virtual air traffic network as simulated in the US.

o. ZDC. Washington ARTCC.

Chapter 2. Operations

Section 1. Operational Positions

2–1–1. POSITIONS AND FREQUENCIES

TBL 2-1-1
Positions & Frequency Chart

Position	Position ID	STARS Handoff	Frequency
Clearance Delivery	CD		128.25
Ground Control	GC		121.7
Local Control	**LC**		**119.1**
Helicopter Control	HC		121.27
Controller in Charge	CIC		N/A
ATIS	ATIS		132.65

NOTE –
Bold text is the primary frequency. CD combines to GC. GC combines to LC. HC combines to LC.

Section 2. Runway Configurations

2–2–1. PREFERRED RUNWAY CONFIGURATIONS

The preferred runway configurations are listed in 2-2-2 and 2-2-3. However, the local controller may utilize non-standard runway configurations as weather and traffic conditions necessitate so long as:

a. The configuration does not negatively affect traffic flow.

b. The configuration is deemed necessary due to weather and traffic conditions.

c. Potomac Consolidated TRACON (PCT) is aware of the non-standard runway configuration.

2–2–2. NORTH OPERATIONS

Runway 1 is the primary arrival/departure runway. Regional jets or smaller may depart but not arrive runway 4. Regional Jets or smaller may arrive or depart runway 33.

NOTE –
North Operation is the calm wind runway configuration. When the wind is less than 5 knots north operations should be used.

2–2–3. SOUTH OPERATIONS

Runway 19 is the primary arrival/departure runway. Regional Jets or smaller may arrive or depart runway 15. Regional Jets or larger may not arrive or depart runway 22.

2–2–4. CHANGE IN RUNWAY CONFIGURATION

The CIC must determine the need for making any active runway changes. A routine runway change occurs when traffic and/or weather conditions are such that the change can be made with little or no degradation in service. In this instance, departures are allowed to depart from the runway originally assigned. Use the following procedures to complete a routine runway change:

a. Provide PCT with the last departure's identification, its estimated time of departure, and the departure runway.

b. Once the last aircraft departures, ensure that no other aircraft departs DCA without a release from PCT.

c. Ensure that departures off the new runway have received the appropriate SID and departure control frequency, as needed.

d. PCT shall inform the CIC when the sector reconfiguration has been completed.

e. Ensure the ATIS has been updated and reflects the proper status.

Section 3. Airport Surface Detection Equipment (ASDE-X)

2–3–1. REQUIREMENTS

Ground Control and Local Control shall ensure all aircraft operating in a movement area have transponders on with Mode C.

2–3–2. PROCEDURES

a. Controllers will review FAAO 7110.65, Chapter 3, Section 6, *Airport Surface Detection Procedures*, for general procedural guidance in use of ASDE.

b. Configure the safety logic in ASDE-X for either NORTH or SOUTH operations.

c. When an arrival aircraft (still airborne, prior to the landing threshold) activates a warning alert, the controller must issue go-around instructions.

d. When two arrival aircraft, or an arrival aircraft and a departing aircraft activate an alert, the controller will issue go-around instructions or take appropriate action to ensure intersecting runway separation is maintained.

e. For other safety logic system alerts, issue instructions/clearances based on good judgment and evaluation of the situation at hand.

Section 4. DC SFRA Procedures

2–4–1. PROCEDURES

DC SFRA procedures are simulated on the VATSIM network using a modified procedure. VFR departures are expected to file a DC SFRA flight plan. However, the FRZ does not impose higher requirements for operations within. Therefore, normal VFR operations, including pattern work, shall be allowed if workload permits.

REFERENCE –
VATSIM DC SFRA Procedures – vzdc.org/publications/downloads
VATSIM DC SFRA Pilot Guide – vzdc.org/publications/downloads
vZDC-PCT-P-01G, Ch 2, Sec 8, Special Flight Rules Area

Chapter 3. Clearance Delivery

Section 1. Duties

3–1–1. RESPONSIBILITIES

Clearance Delivery must:

a. Formulate and issue IFR and VFR clearances to aircraft departing DCA.

b. Review proposed flight plan information received and verify for accuracy and amend routings and altitudes, as necessary, in accordance with appropriate LOA's.

c. For aircraft departing to a constrained airport (airport subject to a traffic management initiative such as EDCT or Call for Release) CD will:

1. Coordinate with the pilot to determine their expected pushback or planned taxi time.

2. Submit a departure release request through IDS.

3. Ensure the pilot is advised of the anticipated wheels up time.

4. Ensure GC and LC are aware of the aircraft's wheels up time. This may be considered coordinated when the correct release time is displayed in the IDS released aircraft list within IDS.

3–1–2. IFR DEPARTURE INSTRUCTIONS

All IFR departures should be assigned a departure and transition consistent with their direction of flight. If an aircraft is unable to fly a SID, they shall be assigned the NATIONAL-SID (NATNL#). Climb via SID shall be used for all aircraft on a SID except the NATNL# departure. Aircraft on the NATNL# departure shall be issued an initial altitude of 5,000, and to expect their filed cruise altitude ten minutes after departure.

3–1–3. TOWER DATA-LINK SERVICES (VTDLS)

DCA is equipped with vTDLS to issue Pre-Departure Clearances (PDCs) for IFR aircraft. TDLS shall be utilized for all eligible aircraft unless in the controller's judgment a voice delivered clearance is more operationally advantageous.

REFERENCE –
vZDC-A-01F, para 4-1-4, Virtual Tower Data Link System (vTDLS)

3–1–4. VFR DEPARTURE INSTRUCTIONS

a. VFR aircraft requesting flight following shall have the following in their VFR flight plan prior to departure:

1. Destination airport.

2. Aircraft type.

3. Requested VFR altitude.

b. VFR aircraft remaining in the pattern will be assigned a VFR code. All VFR departures shall receive a class B clearance with a restriction to maintain VFR at or below:

1. Fixed-Wing Aircraft – 2,500

2. Helicopters – 1,500

c. Use of the STARS VFR flight plan entry function is encouraged.

NOTE –
VFR aircraft remaining in the pattern do not require an altitude restriction.

3–1–5. DEPARTURE FREQUENCY ASSIGNMENT

Assign departure frequencies in accordance with an aircraft's SID, departure gate, or direction of flight.

a. North/East – KRANT (125.65)

b. South/West – TYSON (118.95)

Section 2. Restrictions

3–2–1. ALTITUDE RESTRICTIONS

IFR aircraft will be assigned an expected final cruise altitude in accordance with the table below when destined to destination airports included in the table below. Pilots may make a request for higher with PCT or ZDC once airborne and it may be approved as an operational request at that time.

TBL 3-2-1
IFR Departure Altitude Restrictions

Destination	Turbojet	Turboprop/Propeller
BWI, IAD, HEF	4,000	4,000
EWR, TEB, LGA	FL210	N/A
JFK	17,000	N/A
ORF	14,000	10,000
PHL	11,000	7,000
RIC	12,000	10,000

Section 3. Departure Gates

3–3–1. GENERAL

To standardize departure flows and ensure proper and expeditious routing of traffic, PCT uses departure exit gates for IFR Departures to destinations outside of PCT airspace. Every IFR aircraft leaving DCA must leave PCT airspace bound for one of these gates, unless coordinated otherwise.

3–3–2. HIGH ALTITUDE DEPARTURE GATES

High altitude departure gates should be utilized for aircraft filed above 10,000 feet.

REFERENCE –
vZDC-PCT-P-01G, para 6-4-11, Potomac TRACON Departure Gates chart

NOTE –
Prop and turboprop aircraft may be routed via a low altitude gate regardless of altitude.

TBL 3-3-2
DCA High Altitude Departure Gates

Gate	Routing/Direction	Primary Departure Sector
BUFFR	NW	KRANT (1K)
CLTCH	SW	TYSON (1Y)
COLIN	S/SE	KRANT (1K)
JDUBB	SW	TYSON (1Y)
JERES	N/NW	KRANT (1K)
OTTTO	W	TYSON (1Y)
PALEO	NE	KRANT (1K)
RAMAY	W	TYSON (1Y)
SCRAM	SW	TYSON (1Y)
SWANN	NE	KRANT (1K)
WOOLY	NE	KRANT (1K)

3–3–3. LOW ALTITUDE DEPARTURE GATES

Low altitude departure gates should be utilized for aircraft filed at or below 10,000 feet.

NOTE –
Low altitude aircraft may receive vectors to join any low altitude airway.

TBL 3-3-3
DCA Low Altitude Departure Gates

Gate	Routing/Direction
CSN	W/SW
EMI	N/NE
GVE	S/SW
MRB	N/NW
PXT	SE

Chapter 4. Ground Control

Section 1. Duties

4–1–1. RESPONSIBILITIES

Ground Control must:

a. Sequence departures to meet release restrictions and balance departure fixes.

b. Keep runway exits clear for landing aircraft. GC must coordinate with LC when necessary to have arrivals avoid exiting the RWY at TWYs that are unavoidably congested.

c. Ensure aircraft have transponders on during all ground operations.

4–1–2. RUNWAY CROSSINGS

a. Multiple runway crossings are authorized at:

1. RWY 4/22 and RWY 1/19 at TWY Hotel.

2. RWY 4/22 and RWY 1/19 at TWY Foxtrot.

3. RWY 15/33 and RWY 1/19 at TWY Mike.

b. GC must scan the TDW, final approach course, and runways prior to requesting or issuing crossing instructions.

c. Coordinate runway crossings by stating the runway and intersection or “Westside,” the number of crossings, and, if applicable traffic.

d. GC shall advise LC when crossing is complete by stating clear of the runway crossed.

NOTE –
“Blanket” crossings are not allowed.

PHRASEOLOGY:
CROSS RUNWAY (number), AT (intersection), (number of times), (traffic if necessary).

EXAMPLE –
LC: “Cross RWY 4 at Juliet, three times, traffic holds in position”, or “…traffic four mile final.”

GC: “Cross RWY 4 at Juliet, three times.”

When clear…

GC: “Clear of RWY 4.”

4–1–3. RUNWAY RELEASE TO GROUND PROCEDURES

LC may release Runway 4/22 and/or Runway 15/33 to GC. When LC has released a runway to GC, LC must ensure that aircraft landing Runway 01/33 do not exit on to the released runway. When ground has control of a runway, it may only use this release procedure to cross aircraft. If aircraft need to be held on the runway GC will coordinate with LC before positioning an aircraft on the runway. LC may recall the runway from GC at any time.

4–1–4. RUNWAY ASSIGNMENT

Assign runways based on traffic flow that will ensure operational efficiency.

NOTE –
Assigning an aircraft a non-standard runway requires coordination with local control via verbal or nonverbal methods.

Section 2. Taxiway Utilization

4–2–1. PUSHBACK PROCEDURES

a. Movement Areas.

1. Approve pushbacks onto taxiways.

2. Specify tail direction.

b. Non-Movement Areas.

1. Provide pushback advisories into alleys. Assign spots as needed.

2. Provide traffic advisories into or out of non-movement areas.

NOTE –
Information related to aircraft movement in non-movement areas is advisory in nature and does not imply control responsibility.

4–2–2. AREA OF RESPONSIBILITY

Ground Control assumes responsibility for movement areas West of all runways as depicted in Appendix A.

4–2–3. HOLD BAYS

Ground Control may utilize runway 15 and runway 4 hold bays as necessary to comply with TMI requirements or at the request of Local Control.

4–2–4. TAXIWAY LIMITATIONS

B757 type aircraft are not authorized to taxi on:

a. TWY November between TWY Kilo and the RWY 15 Hold Bay.

b. TWR Whiskey, aircraft may access the Hold Bay from TWY B.

Chapter 5. Local Control

Section 1. Airspace Utilization

5–1–1. AIRSPACE

Local Control assumes responsibility for the airspace as depicted in Appendix B.

NOTE –
When Helicopter Control is not online, Local Control assumes responsibility for Helicopter Control airspace.

5–1–2. TAXIWAY USAGE

Local Control assumes responsibility for movement areas East of all active runways as depicted in Appendix A.

5–1–3. HOLD BAYS

Local Control may utilize the runway 19, runway 1, runway 33, and runway 22 hold bays as necessary to comply with TMI requirements.

5–1–4. CERTIFIED TOWER RADAR DISPLAY

a. The transfer of data between the tower and PCT is permitted when utilizing prescribed entries in either this SOP of the PCT SOP.

b. LC and HC must quick look DCAFR (1V), TYSON (1Y), and KRANT (1K), or the sector that those positions are combined to, at all times.

c. Automated pointouts are permitted between PCT and DCA ATCT when the datablock accurately reflects what the aircraft is doing. Verbal coordination is required if either controller believes there is potential confusion or that further coordination is necessary.

Section 2. Departure Procedures

5–2–1. DEPARTURE INSTRUCTIONS

Assign headings/instructions to departures as follows:

a. For aircraft departing DCA that are not cleared via a SID, issue departure headings in accordance with table 5-2-1 a and b "IFR Departure Headings."

TBL 5-2-1a
IFR Departure Headings (North Operation)

Aircraft Type	Departure Sector	
	TYSON	KRANT
Turbojets	320	
Props	280	090

TBL 5-2-1b
IFR Departure Headings (South Operation)

Aircraft Type	Departure Sector	
	TYSON	KRANT
Turbojets	190	
Props	230*	150

NOTE –
Props to TYSON in South Operations shall be instructed to maintain 3000.

b. All VFR aircraft shall be issued departure instructions in accordance with table 5-2-2 a and b "VFR Departure Instructions."

TBL 5-2-2a
VFR Departure Headings (North Operations)

Direction of Flight	Instructions
North/East	Heading 090
South/West	Northwest over the river

TBL 5-2-2b
VFR Departure Headings (South Operations)

Direction of Flight	Instructions
All	South over the river

5–2–2. LINE UP AND WAIT (LUAW)

a. Landing clearances need not be withheld for traffic holding in position.

b. LUAW procedures are not authorized on Runway 22.

c. LUAW operations must not be used unless the aircraft will depart in three (3) minutes.

d. LC may use LUAW when it is expected that the aircraft will depart after conflicting traffic is clear of the runway/intersection. Utilize good operating practices and memory aids as needed when using LUAW.

e. ASDE-X and all safety logic systems must be operational and used by LC.

5–2–3. DEPARTURE RELEASES

a. Automatic departures are authorized. Aircraft subject to a Traffic Management Initiative (TMI) such as an EDCT or call for release program must depart within their designated release validity period. Automatic departures will be suspended until PCT restores automatic departures when any of the following occur:

1. There was a previous missed approach/go around and automatic departure releases have not been given back by PCT.

2. PCT cancels automatic releases and local control must call for release.

3. An aircraft is departing a non-standard (non-ATIS advertised) departure runway.

b. When one or more of the above conditions is met, Local Control must call PCT for release stating the following information:

1. ACID.

2. Runway and departure heading

3. SID and transition or Initial fix.

5–2–4. TOWER ASSUMED RADAR IDENTIFICATION PROCEDURES

a. Prior to frequency change to departure, the DCA local controller must observe the departing aircraft acquire on the STARS TDW within one mile of departure end of runway. Once this track acquisition occurs, and assuming correct acquisition, then the aircraft may be switched to departure.

b. If acquisition does not occur, then the local controller must notify the PCT departure controller *before* frequency change to departure occurs and provide the callsign of the aircraft and its SID or assigned heading.

c. The primary sector performing departure service will utilize autotrack for all DCA departures. If KRANT (1K) and TYSON (1Y) are decombined, then the sector that is expected to service the majority of departures (i.e. event traffic) will use autotrack.

Section 3. Arrival Procedures

5–3–1. REDUCED SEPARATION MINIMA

Separation of IFR arrivals may be reduced to 2.5 NM within 10 NM of the runway on the final approach course, for Runway 01 arrivals only, assuming increased separation requirements do not exist (i.e. wake turbulence).

5–3–2. MISSED APPROACH/GO AROUND PROCEDURES

Local Control shall immediately coordinate with PCT when a missed approach/go around occurs. Unless otherwise coordinated, issue the aircraft instructions per table 5-3-2 “Missed Approach/Go Around Instructions.”

a. After a missed approach/go around automatic releases are suspended until released by PCT.

b. Tower may re-sequence props providing the Tower ensures separation between the go around and all other pertinent traffic and does not affect the sequence of other IFR arrivals sequenced by PCT.

TBL 5-3-2
Missed Approach/Go Around Instructions

Operation	Altitude	Heading
North	3000*	320
South	3000	185 or RH

NOTE –
In North Operation, aircraft South of DCA VOR/DME shall maintain 2,000 until over the airport to avoid ADW departures.

5–3–3. RUNWAY EXITING PROCEDURES

a. Once aircraft are clear of the runway, they shall be taxied across all other runways prior to handing off to Ground Control.

b. Local Control may utilize runway 22 as a high-speed exit for aircraft arriving Runway 19. Aircraft should be instructed to turn right on taxiway Juliet before handing off to Ground Control.

c. Local Control may utilize runway 33 as a high-speed exit for aircraft arriving Runway 1. Aircraft should be instructed to turn left on taxiway Sierra or November before handing off to Ground Control.

Chapter 6. Helicopter Control

Section 1. Airspace Utilization

6–1–1. AREA OF JURISDICTION

a. HC must operate within LC designated airspace under prearranged coordination.

b. Helicopter operations are authorized on all movement areas.

c. Helicopters arriving or departing an area on the airport must be coordinated with GC and LC as appropriate before authorizing the operation.

d. Helicopter Control assumes responsibility for the airspace as depicted in Appendix B.

Section 2. Procedures

6–2–1. DUTIES

a. HC must:

1. Separate VFR traffic from DCA arrivals and departures.

2. Issue safety alerts and traffic advisories as required.

b. Clear VFR aircraft on routes or into zones as depicted on the Baltimore-Washington Helicopter Route Chart.

c. Issue ATC instructions that will keep unauthorized aircraft clear of P-56.

d. Authorize a frequency change when the pilot reports or you observe the aircraft approaching the outer limits of DCA airspace.

e. Ensure aircraft are squawking assigned beacon codes and validate Mode C of all aircraft operating within the DCA Class B.

f. When operating in DCA ATCT delegated airspace, all helicopter flight data blocks must be modified to appropriate tower position on initial contact, or as soon as traffic permits. Terminate/transfer track control of flight data block and transfer control of communication as appropriate when exiting DCA ATCT airspace.

NOTE –
CRC STARS does not support override modify logic. Controllers will use the automated hand off function to change track ownership of datablocks.

6–2–2. REQUIRED COORDINATION

a. Helicopter Control shall coordinate with Ground Control and Local Control as necessary for departures or arrivals within a movement or non-movement area.

b. It may be necessary to hand off arriving helicopters to Local Control for a landing clearance.

c. Helicopter Control airspace boarders IAD ATCT airspace. Helicopter Control shall initiate radar handoffs to IAD ATCT as needed.

6–2–3. PREARRANGED COORDINATION

Prearranged coordination may be applied by the HC position in LC airspace within the guidelines specified herein. Coordination is considered to have been accomplished under the following conditions:

a. Both LC and HC must be utilizing the TDW (STARS) display.

b. HC must ensure separation from all tracked or non-tracked targets operating within LC airspace, except as authorized by LC.

c. Operations are conducted in accordance with BWI/DCA Helicopter Route Chart (Appendix D).

d. The following data block scratch pad entries indicating the helicopter's intended route of flight (use the primary "Y" scratchpad) may be used at the discretion of LC and HC.

TBL 6-2-3
Helicopter Route Scratchpads

Scratchpad	Route
1CJ	RTE 1 to Cabin John
1GB	RTE 1 to Green Belt
1PZ	RTE 1 to split the P56s
4FW	RTE 4 to Fort Washington
3WC	RTE 3 to Woods Corner
3SF	RTE 3 to Springfield
3GB	RTE 3 to Green Belt
3CJ	RTE 3 to Cabin John
Z1	Zone 1
Z2	Zone 2
Z3	Zone 3
Z4	Zone 4
Z5	Zone 5
Z6	Zone 6
Z7	Zone 7
JPN	Landing Pentagon

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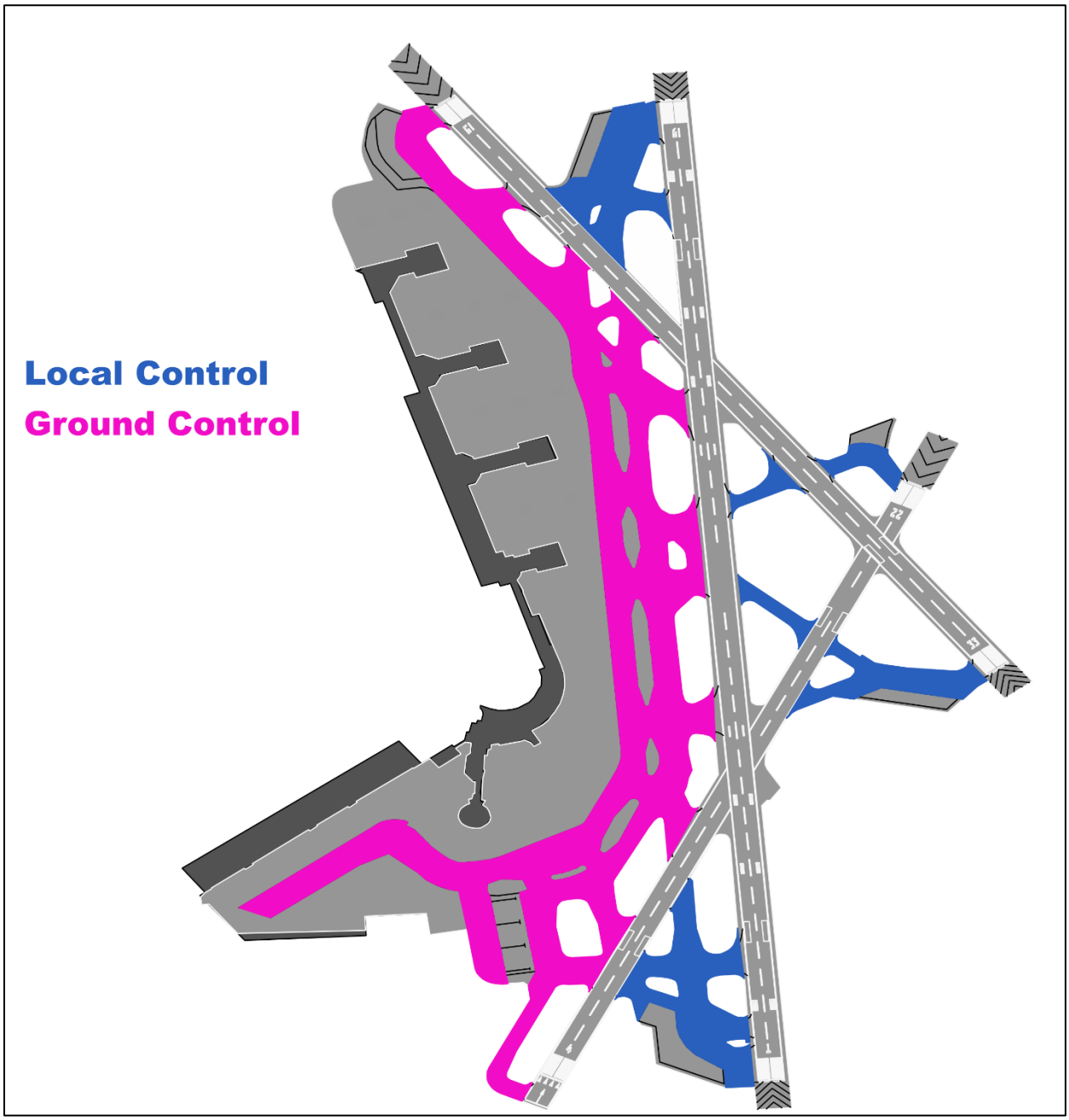
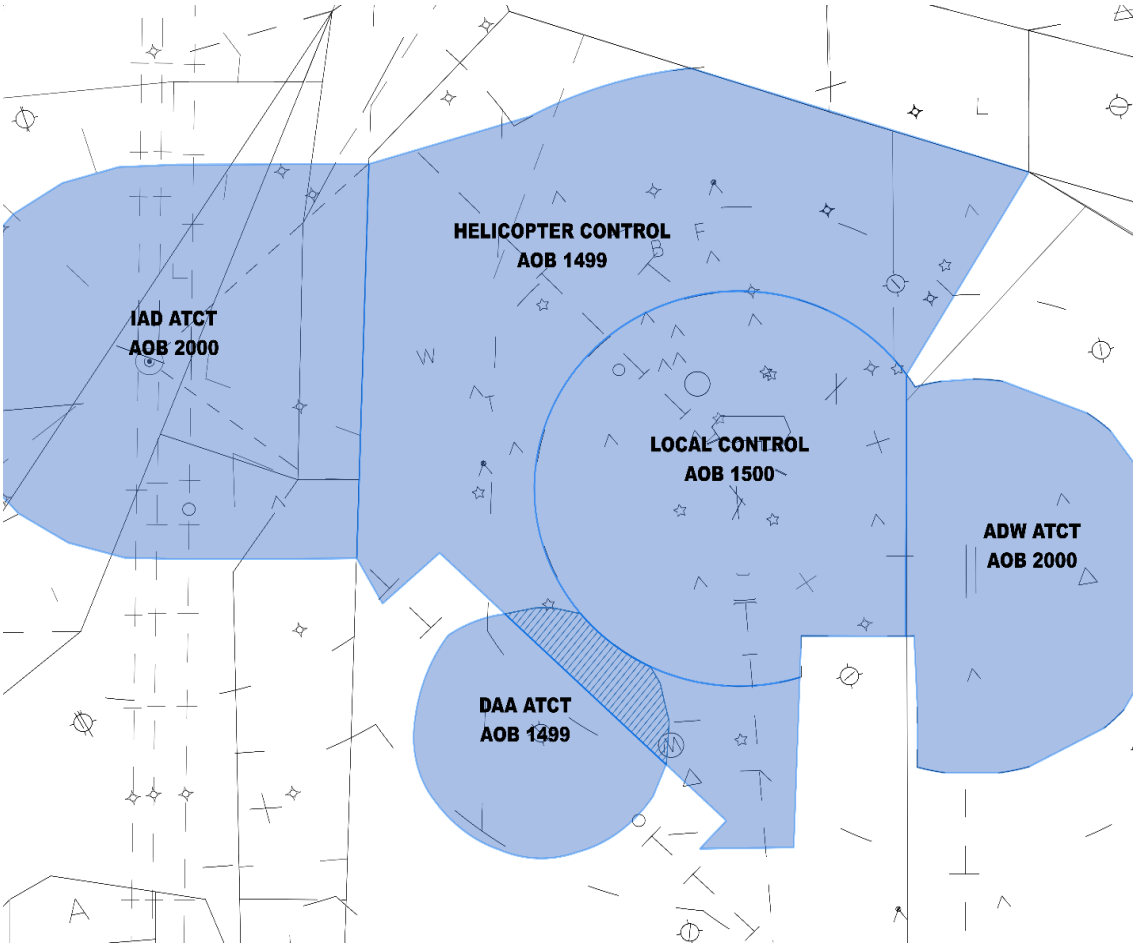
APPENDIX A. TAXIWAY USAGE DIAGRAM

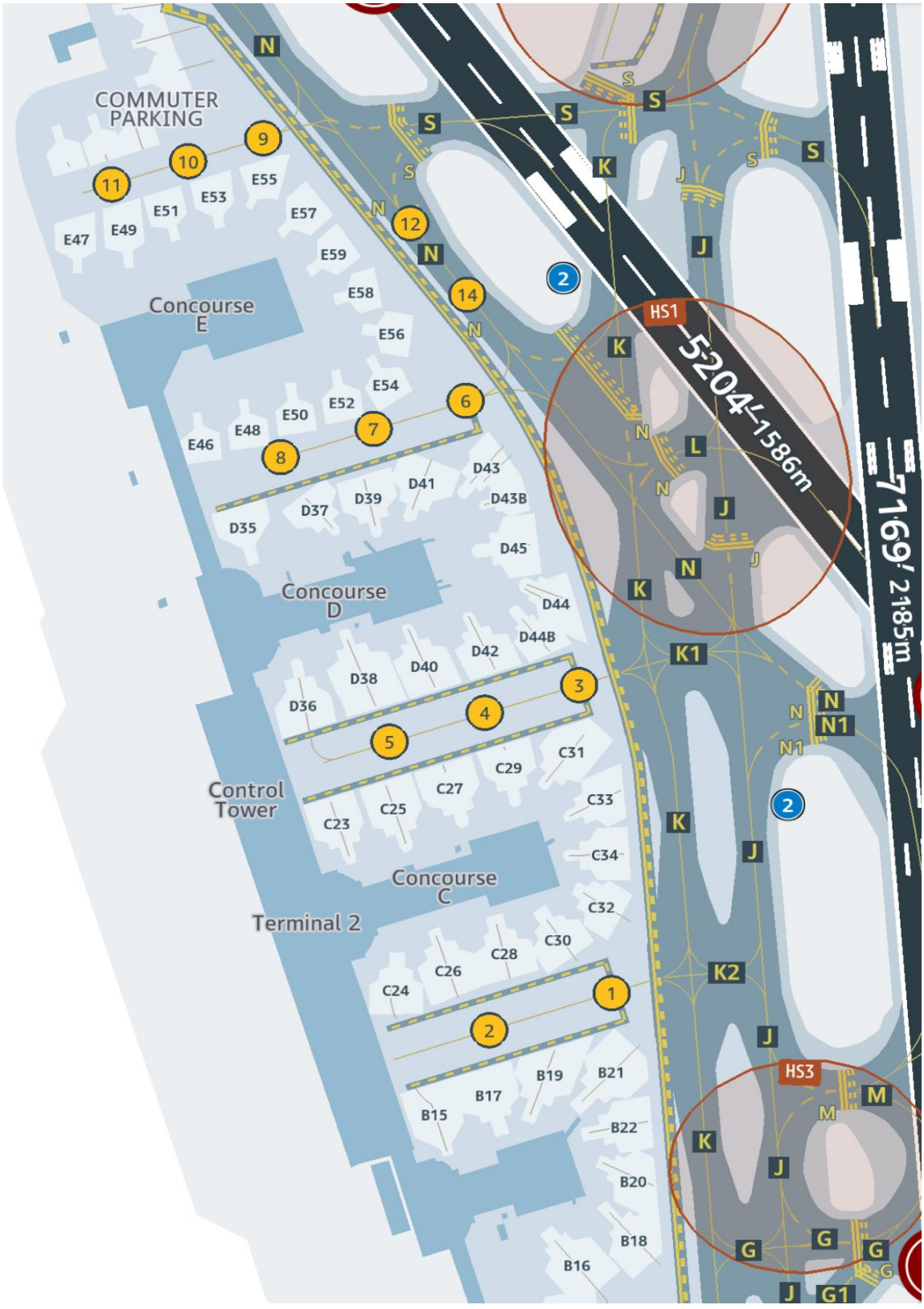


APPENDIX B. LOCAL AND HELICOPTER CONTROL AIRSPACE



NOTE –
Helicopter Control assumes responsibility for the hatched section of DAA ATCT airspace when DAA ATCT is not online or closed.

APPENDIX C. PUSHBACK SPOT NUMBERS



APPENDIX D. HELICOPTER ROUTES