

Opinion: Privatized air traffic control plan could fly right

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Commercial planes congested on a runway at JFK airport, waiting for takeoff. (June 12, 1990) Newsday / J. Conrad Williams Jr. Photo Credit

When it comes to deciding who should run what between the federal government and private industry, it's best to split up the tasks based on who is generally good at each. That's very much the case with the air traffic control system of the United States, which President Donald Trump wants to make a private, nonprofit entity as part of his larger infrastructure plan. The system employs 35,000 people and oversees 50,000 flights a day. Trump hopes the change would remove air traffic control from government budgets that are holding it back.

For more than a decade, the Federal Aviation Administration has been working on NextGen, a plan to convert from land-based radars developed after World War II to satellite navigation GPS technology. For years, NextGen was promised nationwide by 2025. Now the FAA says it will happen only in increments, with no completion date in sight.²

Much of the holdup lies in the federal appropriations process. Experts say completion would cost \$35 billion of which only \$7 billion has been approved, and create \$160 billion in economic

¹ aiR footnote: This photo is 27-years old! The front aircraft is TWA (gone, absorbed by American, the second plane in line). The third plane is Eastern (ceased operating in 1991; assets went primarily to American and Delta).

² aiR footnote: Actually, the problem is not lack of funds or inept program management; the main problem with NextGen is it is just a brand name, oversold by FAA and industry. If a used car dealer tells you the car you are looking at will fly, cruises on water at 30 knots, will mow the lawn and watch the kids, and you buy the car, you are a sucker. We are all being played as suckers (as is Congress) as FAA and industry collude (they call it 'collaboration') to spin the alleged positives and ignore the obvious negatives of the NextGen scheme.

benefit. The lack of improvements has led to a system that isn't meeting all air travel needs, particularly in places like the metropolitan area. NextGen would let planes safely fly much closer to each other than they can now. Postponing its adoption costs fliers time, productivity and peace of mind.³

The airlines want this. The National Air Traffic Controllers Association wants it too, now that it has been guaranteed wages, benefits and collective bargaining rights for its 15,000 members would be protected. And privatization of such systems has worked in other nations, including Canada and Britain.

Opponents contend flier safety would be at risk. And they argue that letting airlines pay for the system via fees on passengers would let the airline industry collude to charge whatever it sees fit for the system.⁴

The answer is to split operations and oversight between the federal government and the private entity that would manage air traffic control. There are models for such a division of authority that already work, such as publicly regulated for-profit utilities.

Much of what needs to be done would absolutely be handled better by a private consortium of the airlines than by the FAA. Nimble investment in and adoption of new technology to make systems more efficient, convenient and profitable are exactly what private, market-oriented industries such as airlines do. What private industry can be terrible at, particularly when companies in an industry band together, is charging a fair price, properly serving and safeguarding less-profitable customer centers, and making safety a top priority.

The FAA must always have a role in regulating our air traffic control system. Now comes an opportunity for the industry to decide how to configure air traffic control for ever-modern efficiency,⁵ profitability, capacity and convenience. The charges travelers would pay to fund this new system and its safety standards should be approved by the government in a process that protects consumers' wallets while also providing a reliable and modern system.

— *The editorial board*

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(Highlights, footnotes and minor edits may have been added, but only to add analysis & clarification)

³ aiR footnote: **'Peace of Mind'?** ... how about chronic sleep loss? Tens of thousands of people are being subjected to terrible increases in repetitive aircraft noise (and unhealthy air pollutants, too) at the key hub airports where NextGen has been rolled out. Flights, especially arrivals, are lower and slower (thus louder), and being jammed in tighter and tighter by ATC, to **'increase runway throughput'**. Airline profits are trumping residential health and quality of life. Entire communities are being destroyed, all to tweak the airline bottom line, and yet here, Newsday's Editorial Board makes no mention of this gross aviation injustice.

⁴ aiR footnote: Collusion between airlines is already rampant. Most of the airlines in the photo (1990 ... really!) went bankrupt and became absorbed by today's final four: American, Delta, United and Southwest. The only two other U.S. domestic airlines of significance are Alaska and JetBlue. Smaller 'regionals' are contracted to feed passengers for these remaining airlines. The vast majority of city-pairs offer near-zero competition, either monopolized by one airline, or duopolized by just two airlines.

⁵ aiR footnote: What is 'ever-modern efficiency'? If efficiency is the goal, the major airlines would significantly scale back hub operations. For example, excessive hub scheduling at both LaGuardia and JFK is the major contributor to delay inefficiencies in the entire U.S. system. But, JetBlue, Delta and American all refuse to reduce their schedules, and instead press FAA to reduce aircraft spacing to jam more flights in/out each hour.