April 4, 2011

The Honorable John L. Mica
Chairman, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
2165 Rayburn House Office Building
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Re: H.R. 658 and Related Issues

Dear Chairman Mica:

I am writing to you in your capacity as chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and as a member of my Florida Congressional delegation.

The funding of the national aviation system is one of the key legislation actions and much of the focus is on providing the requisite financial resources so that the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) can continue to improve and operate the nation’s aviation system. Funding any national program needs to take into consideration its efficiency and effectiveness in meeting the true needs of the air-traveling public. This is especially relevant in the current economic circumstances facing our nation and its citizens, and it fashioning a responsible national budget.

I have made a 39-year career in the airport and aviation consulting industry and have observed that one component of that industry that is lacking national direction is general aviation, particularly those airports that are used primarily for recreational flying. The FAA has acknowledged that it has not presented a national strategy with respect to the general aviation component of the industry. The National Plan of Integrated Aviation Systems (NPIAS) comes closest to that vision, but in reality it is nothing short of a wish list of projects that purports to justify the extent of federal funding required for the national system of airports. Congress has not authorized nor appropriated the investment levels reported in the annual versions of the NPIAS, and rightfully so.

We have too many general aviation airports in this country, serving a dwindling number of users who are operating their aircraft fewer hours, especially today. Although this is not encouraging, it also represents an opportunity for change in national policies affecting these airports through effective leadership.

Many owners of general aviation airports that are publicly-owned and federally-obligated (have received federal grant funds for capital projects and land/easement acquisition) are facing critical economic conditions. They are seeking the release from their grant obligations prior to their expiration (land and easement acquisition projects have no expiration date; these owners are held to their grant obligations in perpetuity.) The release would allow these entities to sell their airport...
land resource so that it might be placed into the highest and best use and provide enhanced economic opportunities for their constituents now rather than later, if ever. They are prepared to return the net proceeds from the sale of the airport land resource to the FAA so that the funds can be directed to other airports where the need is justified.

Privately-owned airport owners who have accepted federal grant funds and remain federally-obligated, and are nearing retirement age are now learning that the proceeds to them personally from the sale of their airport will be viewed by the FAA as an act of revenue diversion. This effectively translates into the loss of a potential significant retirement fund for such owners, often for having accepted a relatively small sum of grant funds. And, if such funds were used for land or easement acquisition, the federal obligation remains with the airport in perpetuity.

The FAA is unable and unwilling to act responsively to these issues due to the laws that are in effect and the stringency (and one-sidedness) of their internal policies and regulations with respect to releases from grant obligations and revenue diversion. The agency clings to policies that date back to the early days of civil aviation, and Congress has been remiss in not addressing this aspect as part of its oversight responsibilities. It is time to make a change through leadership at the Congressional level.

As a case in point, I am enclosing the title page and preface of a report that addresses the request by the City of St. Clair, Missouri to obtain a release from its grant obligations. The St. Clair Regional Airport serves as a base for 16 aircraft, none of whose owners reside in the City. The FAA reports that the airport accommodated a total of 3,280 annual takeoffs and landings in 2009; nearly 70 percent are classified as local (operating in the traffic pattern, within sight of the airport, and in training areas within a 20-mile radius.) The airport is not operational for arrivals in instrument flight rule conditions and the FAA has no plans to publish an instrument approach procedure to either end of the single 3,198-foot runway. There are several alternative airports within a reasonable driving time that can accommodate these based and transient users. The City has rejected its annual entitlement funds ($150,000) and is preparing to demolish two hangars that have been determined to be unsafe for use without replacement. Although the City will honor its grant obligations to keep the airport open, it has no intent to improve the facility. The full report can be made available at your request. I trust that the preface alone will present further rationale that a change in the FAA's policies with respect to grant obligations is in order.

Although addressing an appropriate strategy for general aviation airports will not make a significant change in the use of our nation's financial resources and address budget challenges, it is a start and, when combined with objective assessments of other federal programs, can realize significant savings. I surmise that the funds returned to the FAA by communities that are able to re-use their airport land resources will generate a major source of funding for those general aviation airports that warrant and can justify capital improvements. This reduces the impact on the national budget, which is needs improved management. Again, it reflects the QED
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need for leadership that this segment of the airport industry deserves to best accommodate its unique air travel demands.

The FAA needs to be given a new direction for managing its investment in general aviation airports and the impetus to adopt policies and implement regulations that are appropriate for the current times. Recover the past investment in the aviation infrastructure and use those funds to improve those general aviation airports that are truly important to our national air transportation system.

I am not one to voice an opinion without follow through. To this end, I would like to be proactive in this issue and offer my services pro bono to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee in fashioning responsive and responsible national policies and regulations for general aviation airports. I feel strongly that there is a need to bring a more realistic and responsible way of thinking that will ultimately realize a better national general aviation airport system, policies, regulations and funding program.

I look forward to your reply.

Respectfully submitted,

[Signature]

Ronald F. Price, P.E.
Principal

RFP/psa
Enclosures

cc: The Honorable Ander Crenshaw, Florida, Ninth District
The Honorable Bill Nelson, Senator, Florida
The Honorable Marco Rubio, Senator, Florida
Mayor Ron Blum, City of St. Clair, Missouri

SOURCE: pages 200-202 of the K39 Closure Final Document package