



AIRCRAFT OWNERS AND PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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Testimony before the New Jersey Assembly Committee on Transportation, Public Works, and Independent Authorities

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for allowing us to appear before the Committee this morning as you hold this hearing on General Aviation in the State of New Jersey.

My name is Greg Pecoraro, and with me is Mr. Greg Winton, our Eastern Regional Representative. We are here on behalf of AOPA, the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association.

Over the last several years, AOPA has been actively engaged with others in New Jersey's Aviation community to protect New Jersey's airport system, and it is a pleasure to be here with them today as your committee turns its attention to this vital sector of the state's transportation system.

Like New Jersey itself, the state's general aviation (GA) industry is rich in tradition and history. In fact, the term "airport" was first used here in New Jersey, when a 1919 newspaper article referred to Bader Field (sadly now closed) as "Atlantic City's Airport".

No one doubts the importance of commercial aviation to the nation's economy, as millions of passengers travel through major air carrier airports like Newark Liberty International, or even smaller regional airports like Trenton Mercer. Unfortunately, many people overlook the tremendous value of General Aviation and the small airports on which it depends. New Jersey's airport system provides the vital infrastructure that allows more than 2.5 million general aviation operations a year. Far from its occasional image of being the preserve of weekend hobbyists or corporate fat cats, general aviation is vital to moving goods, services, and people into, around, and out of New Jersey. Thousands of businesses in this state rely on general aviation, as do health care workers, accident victims, scientists, public safety officers, and many others.

General aviation faces many challenges, one of which includes the high cost of owning and operating an aircraft. As the cost of aviation fuel has risen faster than the cost of automotive fuel, many aircraft owners and operators are feeling tremendous economic pressures. In New Jersey, these pressures are increased by one of the highest aviation fuel taxes in the nation. We encourage you to hold the line on the state's aviation fuel tax.

Two other major challenges facing aviation today are the encroachment of incompatible land uses near airports, and the pressure to redevelop airport land for other uses. Nowhere is this truer than in New Jersey, where land values and development pressures are among the highest in the nation. Too often, airport property, or land around it in the airport's safety zone

represents the largest tract of developable land in already densely populated areas. It is important that the state do all it can to protect this land from incompatible development.

Incompatible land uses near an airport can have a tremendous impact, reducing safety for pilots and airport neighbors, increasing noise and decreasing the quality of life for local residents, encourage higher operating costs, and create pressure that could restrict operations or even close the airport permanently.

Most public use airports are owned by local or state governments, and receive a combination of federal, state and local funds that create a web of legal obligations that make it very difficult for local pressures to cause airport restrictions or closures. But privately-owned public use airports are much harder to protect.

Here in New Jersey, this problem is particularly acute because of the high percentage of privately owned, public use airports. These airports rarely receive public funds that create those legal obligations that keep airports open in the face of development pressure or neighbor complaints. One bright spot was adoption of the Airport Rights Development, which enabled the Commissioner of Transportation to purchase the development rights at a general aviation airport. Unfortunately, this great tool has not been adequately funded or widely utilized. We would encourage you to consider ways in which the state can act to strengthen this program, and apply it more broadly.

Another issue for privately-owned airports is the growing concern that local governments in New Jersey might begin using their eminent domain powers to take airport properties in order to restrict operations, or ultimately close an airport. For that reason, AOPA and others in the aviation community have been supporting a variety of measure that would restrict the ability of local governments to use those powers against privately owned airports. Although none of these bills are before your committee, we encourage you to do all you can to support these efforts and give privately-owned public use airports great legal protections.

Before closing, let me say a few words about AOPA. The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association is the largest general aviation organization in the world, representing the interests of 415,000 members, over two-thirds of the nation's pilots, including 9,000 here in New Jersey. One of our primary missions as an organization is to ensure that general aviation remains accessible and affordable all across the country. AOPA is strongly committed to the preservation and enhancement of America's general aviation airport infrastructure, and to ensuring the long-term viability of general aviation airports as part of a multi-modal national transportation system.

AOPA wants to be your trusted resource and partner in ensuring the health and vitality of general aviation in New Jersey. We look forward to continuing our work with you, and again, thank you for this opportunity today.