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July 21, 2009

Mr. Joe Tannehill, Chairman  
Panama City – Bay County Airport Authority  
3173 Airport Road, Box A  
Panama City, FL 32405

Dear Mr. Tannehill:

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) represents the general aviation (GA) interests of 416,000 members, more than two-thirds of the nation's pilots – including more than 32,300 in the state of Florida. On behalf of our membership, AOPA is committed to ensuring the future viability and development of general aviation as part of a national and statewide transportation system.

We are writing to express our serious concern regarding what appears to be a lack of development of appropriate and adequate facilities at the new airport to accommodate general aviation facilities and operations at the new Panama City – Bay County Airport (PFN). While physical ground is being prepared and is apparently “shovel ready,” no GA facility construction is underway to support fixed base operations (FBOs), tie-down areas or new hangars. It is also our understanding that no leases for such facilities have been executed to date. With a mere 10 months until the planned opening of the new airport, we would have expected the construction of general facilities at the new airport to be well underway.

We have learned however, that the Authority recently reached agreement with a small group of private hangar owners that had a long-term lease at the existing airport for facilities at the new airport; a step in the right direction. But the need for general aviation facilities and hangars for others being forced to vacate the existing airport far exceeds this group of individuals.

When we wrote to the Authority on the subject of the new airport and general aviation facilities in March 2004, we indicated that adequate general aviation facilities were critical and that these facilities must be better than or equal to what was currently in place at the existing airport. We also insisted that any new facilities must be provided on a fair and reasonable basis without significant increases in rates and charges.

It is important to reiterate that it has not been the general aviation community pushing for this new airport. GA operators have been well served and likely would continue to be at the existing airport. In fact, GA is the predominate user of the existing airport, accounting for nearly 60,000 operations per year according to Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) airport master records. Airline operations on the other hand, the primary argument used in seeking the new airport, account for roughly 5% of airport operations (3,753) according to those same FAA airport records. Yet, general aviation operators appear as if they are being treated as an afterthought. Even the promised GA crosswind runway seems to be in jeopardy of ever being built.

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Construction of the new airport has indeed been a controversial issue for many years. Even the March 2004 straw poll conducted in the county of local citizens found that 54% of the residents polled were against the new airport. In that same context, AOPA members have been divided as to the need for a new airport. But, the reality is that the new airport is being built and the old one will be closed in the not-too-distant future. We expect GA to be fully supported at the new airport.

We are requesting that the Authority place the needs of general aviation operators as a top priority and immediately undertake actions that will ensure that new facilities are fully developed and ready for occupancy prior to the proposed May 2010 opening of the new airport. Since general aviation operators are essentially being forced to undertake this move, where long-term leases exist, the Authority should accept the financial burden of providing these new facilities. While we understand the financial landscape has been significantly altered in the past year, we believe that creative solutions can be found and implemented to ensure a strong GA presence at the new airport exists without the imposition of unreasonable or unjustly discriminatory rates and charges.

We appreciate your consideration of our concerns and trust the Authority will undertake swift action to address these issues. With over 14,226 aircraft based in the state, it is obvious that General Aviation plays a vital role in the state and county economy. That role should be nurtured and expanded at the new airport.

If you or your staff have any questions or would like to discuss this matter personally, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Very truly yours,



Bill Dunn  
Vice President  
Local Airport Advocacy

cc: Commissioner Bill Cramer  
Commissioner Rick Koehnemann  
Commissioner Gerry Clemons  
Commissioner Andy McKenzie, Jr.  
Randall Curtis, Executive Director

Mayor Scott Clemons, City of Panama City

Commissioner Jerry L. Girvin, Chairman, Bay County

Dean Stringer, Manager  
FAA Orlando Airport District Office

Bill Ashbaker, State Aviation Manager, Florida Department of Transportation