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Deregulation, Regulation Unkind To Smaller Airports

Small-community air service faces structural pressures like never before. While a tenet of the 1978 U.S. Airline Deregulation Act, fostering small-community air service is proving to be a broken promise of yesterday's deregulators and today's federal government.

A recent reminder of the federal government renegeing on its promise to foster small-community air service is a letter written to FAA Administrator Michael Huerta from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and six other senators regarding an FAA working group.

The task force is studying the issue of what constitutes an adequate number of training hours required to be a commercial first officer.

The issue of pilot supply has become a major issue that is reducing, and will further reduce, the level of air service at our nation's small communities. Based on rigorous analysis, there are 150–200 communities at risk of seeing a total, or near total, loss of their commercial air service because of unresolved industry issues.

To combat the misinformation being metastasized in the halls of government, and to remind those of the unintended consequences of their actions, the Regional Air Service Alliance (RASA) was formed (www.airservicealliance.com). RASA is an organization comprised of airports of all sizes that have come together to address the many structural impediments facing small-community air service in the U.S. The issue of pilot supply is but one headwind when it comes to small-community air service.

Vital Industry

Airports care because the U.S. airport industry facilitates a system that carries 2 million people each and every day; and airports provide the infrastructure for an industry that flies 27,000 passenger and cargo flights every day. The U.S. airline industry drives \$1.5 trillion in economic activity every year, and relies on airport infrastructure to do so. At the end of the day, airports are the losers, as the airlines will simply figure out how to fly a smaller network.

Small-community air service has been a pawn in many industry games over the years. Before it is too late, we need to be able to preserve as much of today's system as possible, and gestate the regional system of tomorrow.

Airports are economic engines of their respective communities. Losing air service for a community means reduced economic activity; a risk of being erased from tomorrow's trading map; reduced tourism spend; and losing attractiveness as a place where a business might locate or relocate. A loss of service means that

competition is likely reduced.

This fact has been playing out at a number of New York airports over the past months. In short, losing air service will take our nation's small communities off the grid and prevent them from reaching their economic potential. The loss of this vital connection will drive them towards economic irrelevance.

"RASA is not about making the system less safe. There is not one airport director that comes to work every day where safety is not their No. 1 priority."

Rather, it is a group that has come together to be very vocal regarding the unintended consequences of government policies that allowed a redraw of U.S. airline-industry architecture that favors larger markets at the expense of smaller markets, despite promises to the contrary. Then the federal government exacerbated the problems confronting small-community air service, by adopting legislation that reduced the supply of pilots.

RASA agrees that pilot training must be based upon a qualitative, scenario-based and highly structured program. Today's pilot shortage can be resolved through safety-first solutions that

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can be realized within today's regulations, all the while promoting the safety of the system. However, a policy change to refill the pilot pipeline must

be made posthaste if we are to arrest the atrophy of the nation's commercial air service grid as we know it.

As the FAA and other branches of government examine ways to support small-community air service and economic development, the airport community implores a comprehensive review of current policies, programs and laws governing air transport in place. We need to determine their effect on the small-community air service segment of the economy.

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