

Testimony of Cindi Martin, C.M., Airport Director, Glacier Park International Airport, Before the House Committee on Homeland Security, Subcommittee on Transportation Security, Concerning TSA's Management of the Screening Partnership Program

Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Richmond, and Members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the opportunity to share with the Committee the Flathead Municipal Airport Authority's experience with the TSA Screening Partnership Program (SPP) application and transition process. The Authority owns and operates Glacier Park International Airport, a Category 3, non-hub/GA airport located in Northwest Montana – 20 minutes from Glacier National Park.

The Airport is one of 13 commercial service airports in Montana. Currently there are 5 airports in eastern Montana with essential air service (EAS) that participate in the Screening Partnership Program (SPP) and to-date 5 additional Montana commercial service airports have applied to the Screening Partnership Program (SPP).

It is not a coincidence that most of the commercial service airports in Montana have applied to the Program.

In September and October of 2007, TSA senior management came to Montana and made personal visits to every commercial service airport in the state to promote the Screening Partnership Program. TSA management encouraged each airport to apply to the Program, citing the agency's desire to be relieved of the Transportation Security Officer (TSO) human resources burden so that the agency could concentrate on regulatory compliance and oversight.

TSA's strong encouragement to apply to the Program dovetailed with the Airport Authority's serious concerns about TSA staffing levels and customer service at Glacier Park International Airport.

Prior to the decision to apply to the Program, the Airport's TSA staffing numbers had been reduced every year, despite increasing passenger traffic. And, in the winter of 2007, airport management was informed that the then-current staffing level was again being reduced, this time by nearly half – from 30 to 17. Additionally, airport management consistently received complaints from the flying public about poor customer service from TSOs and long wait times, and incumbent air carriers regularly complained about flight delays caused by slow TSA baggage and passenger screening.

In the summer of 2007, the Airport Authority invested in an expansion of the airport's security checkpoint with the expectation that some passenger screening efficiencies would be realized, but these benefits did not materialize.

Numerous appeals by the Airport Authority to TSA headquarters about staffing and customer service issues went unanswered. Finally in March 2008, after engaging Montana's congressional representatives, TSA headquarters informed the airport that screener staffing at the airport was based upon specific data fed into the agency's Staffing Allocation Model (SAM) based on October Official Airline Guide (OAG) data.

Although the airport receives year-round air carrier service, we experience a large seasonal spike in passenger traffic from June through September. Passenger traffic from October through May is significantly reduced, and so using October OAG flight schedules to plan for staffing at this airport is not appropriate for determining staffing levels that include the peak summer season.

Given these frustrating communications with TSA headquarters, continued staffing problems, and customer complaint issues, the Airport Authority began exploring the SPP option in earnest. Following considerable due diligence, the Airport Authority became convinced that a private screening contractor could better serve the flying public and our air carrier partners' needs far better than the TSA workforce could or would.

The Authority's SPP Application

In October 2009, the Authority submitted its application to participate in the Screening Partnership Program in accordance with the standards in effect at the time.

And then we waited.

On January 28, 2011, TSA leadership announced that TSA would not expand the Screening Partnership Program, because it did not see a clear or substantial advantage to expanding the program, and that the pending applications from 5 airports were denied. Thus, without visiting, consulting, or communicating with the Airport Authority, or providing any substantive justification for its decision, TSA summarily sent the Airport Authority a letter denying our application.

Numerous appeals by the Airport Authority to TSA headquarters and leadership inquiring about the new standard and the metrics used to justify the denial of our application went unanswered.

In the spring of 2012, TSA announced that there was a new application and process for applying to the Program. I was contacted by the SPP office and encouraged to submit a new application.

The instructions to TSA's new application form state that "Given the level of participation in the current program, and in order to maximize TSA's effectiveness as a Federal counterterrorism security agency, TSA is not inclined at this time to expand the Screening Partnership Program unless there are clear and substantial advantages to do so." The instructions go on to state that "Therefore, your application must explain how private screening at your airport will provide those clear and substantial advantages, while maintaining our high standards and meeting the threats of today and the future."

Despite the fact that the Airport never received an answer as to the specific substantive reasons its first application was denied – or even the substantive criteria against which the new application would be measured – we applied again, on April 6, 2012. At approximately the same time, three other Montana airports re-applied to the Screening Partnership Program – Bozeman, Butte and West Yellowstone. The Missoula International Airport, whose application had been denied in January 2011, did not reapply.

In October 2012, the four Montana airports were informed that a Request for Proposal (RFP) for SPP services at our airports was being issued. The RFP was released on October 23, 2012, with responses due on November 26, 2012.

In mid-January 2013 the Montana airports were informed that the contract award was being pushed back to late February 2013.

Initial indication of a contract award was made by TSA to the four Montana airports in March 2013. And, then without warning or explanation, the solicitation was canceled on April 17, 2013.

There was no official reason offered by TSA for the cancelation, nor were we given a timeline for the reissuance of an RFP.

On August 30, 2013 the four Montana airports were notified that a second RFP for SPP services had been issued and that responses were due by September 30, 2013.

On November 13, 2013 we were informed, via email, that the response due date had been pushed back to November 19, 2013.

And, finally, on May 30, 2014, the four Montana airports that had applied to the SPP program were notified that an SPP contract had been awarded effective June 1, 2014, and, that the transition to the SPP contractor would occur within 90 days – that is, by August 29, 2014.

Four years and ten months after our first application to the Program.

Within days of the official notification of the award, the SPP contractor was onsite at our Airport. And while the transition period has not been without a few hiccups, we are seeing light at the end of what has been a very long tunnel.

The Authority's decision to apply for SPP was not made lightly - it was made in the best interest of the flying public, our air carrier partners and the community. And, despite the frustrating length of time through the fits and starts of the process and the lack of communication from TSA, we would do it all again. We believe in the Screening Partnership Program, and firmly believe that SPP is right for Glacier Park International Airport.

That concludes my prepared statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions you or the other Subcommittee members may have.