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Before the U.S House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
Subcommittee on Aviation
“Connecting Rural America to the National Airspace System”
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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Subcommittee: Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. My name is Shawn Dobberstein. I am the Executive Director of Hector International Airport located in Fargo, North Dakota. I also serve as vice chair of the American Association of Airport Executives’ Air Service Committee. I am here to represent a vital and often overlooked segment of our nation's aviation system: rural air service. America’s aviation system is the gold standard of the world. However, that standard must apply to every American, regardless of their zip code. Connecting rural communities to the National Airspace System (NAS) ensures that small-town America is not left behind in our modern, global economy.

The Economic Lifeline of Rural Airports

For rural and isolated communities, commercial air service is not merely a convenience. It is an economic driver that creates local jobs, attracts businesses, and provides residents with essential access to specialized medical care and larger economic hubs. When small community airports are linked to the national network, they bridge the economic disparity that can exist between urban and rural regions. Without them, regional isolation deepens, and local economies inevitably suffer.

Challenges Facing Rural Aviation

Currently, rural air service faces a number of significant headwinds. Small community air service recovery from COVID lagged compared to larger airports and was further impacted by the acute pilot shortage coming out of the pandemic. The aviation industry is still navigating localized pilot shortages and shifting carrier economics, including the reduction of smaller regional aircraft in favor of larger aircraft. This may result in reduced frequencies for some communities. Reduced frequency means fewer backup options when flights are delayed or canceled. Additionally, limited service can create scheduling challenges as poorly scheduled flights can make connections unworkable. Finally, the current threat of high jet fuel prices hits small communities hardest as airlines reduce flights or end service altogether.

A further challenge for small and rural communities is the pending expiration of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) funding at the end of fiscal year 2026. Without an extension, \$4 billion in annual airport funding - half of airport infrastructure funding over the last five years - will evaporate. Airports continue to have significant infrastructure

needs and while we may face some air service headwinds today, it takes years to build the infrastructure needed to support anticipated growth in demand and operations in the coming decades. Without adequate funding – particularly for smaller airports that have less access to capital – runways, gates and terminals will not be adequate to support future growth, including new entrants. A lack of appropriate infrastructure may also further constrain the system.

We appreciate the work of this committee in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 to wisely reauthorize crucial programs that support small and rural community air service. Without these programs, many airlines would be forced to abandon smaller markets. Furthermore, as the Federal Aviation Administration modernizes the NAS — transitioning to new technologies that improve safety and efficiency and integrate unmanned aircraft — we must ensure rural airports are not left behind in this technological leap. Infrastructure modernization funding must reach non-hub and general aviation airports so they can safely manage all operations, including new entrants in the airspace.

Protecting and Enhancing Critical Programs

To maintain this critical connectivity, Congress must prioritize six actionable pillars:

1. **Fully Fund the Essential Air Service (EAS) Program:** The EAS program is the bedrock of rural air connectivity, ensuring that remote communities maintain a baseline of scheduled air service. Proposals to drastically cut EAS funding threaten to sever the lifelines of dozens of rural communities. While we are open to considering improvements to the program, we appreciate the strong support for EAS by this committee and the Congress.
2. **Expand the Small Community Air Service Development Program (SCASD):** SCASD grants provide small communities with essential support to address air service and airfare challenges and to attract new carriers. We appreciate the continued support for this program by the committee and the Congress as well. Even with that support, demand for these grants consistently exceeds available funding. Increasing funding for this program would enable rural airports to develop new service opportunities and strengthen their long-term sustainability.
3. **Invest in Rural Aviation Infrastructure:** The Airport Improvement Program provides critical funding to rural and regional airports, and Congress must continue to provide stable funding for this program. Thank you again to this committee for increasing the funding for AIP to \$4 billion annually. Additionally, we also urge Congress to extend the IIJA aviation funding programs beyond fiscal year 2026 to avoid a \$4 billion annual funding cliff and to support critical airport infrastructure needs including safety projects, terminal upgrades, and air traffic control tower improvements.
4. **Support the Contract Tower Program:** The FAA Contract Tower Program provides 266 smaller airports in 46 states with cost-effective ATC services that enhance aviation safety and help connect smaller airports and rural communities with our national air transportation system. Without this program, many small airports would

not have tower operations that enhance aviation safety. We urge Congress to provide funding for this critical program at existing and prospective locations.

5. **Workforce Programs and Controller Staffing:** While the pilot and technician shortage may not be as acute as it has been in recent years and while the administration is focused on increasing controller staffing, it is critical that we continue to invest in recruitment, education and training of aviation professionals across the workforce. Existing programs like Aviation Workforce Development Grants, potential changes to student loan programs for pilots and expansion of the Enhanced Collegiate Training Initiative (ECTI) will help to ensure we have the workforce ready for the future, supporting service to communities large and small.
6. **Modernization of the ATC System:** The aviation industry strongly supports modernizing the ATC system. Small communities know all too well the impact that restrictions on the system can have on operations. Chicago, Newark, and San Francisco are all currently experiencing constrained operations due to limitations of the ATC system. These constraints impact smaller communities as they are likely the first markets to be cut when capacity is limited. Ensuring we have a modern, safe ATC system will also enable efficiency and future growth, improving connectivity into smaller, rural communities.

Conclusion

Our national aviation system is only as strong as its weakest link. Connecting rural America to the broader system isn't just a matter of equity; it is an investment in the geographic and economic resilience of our entire country.

Thank you for your time, your leadership, and your continued commitment to rural aviation and air service. I look forward to your questions.