



STATEMENT OF

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BEFORE

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COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON AVIATION**

**HEARING ON
“CONNECTING RURAL AMERICA TO THE NATIONAL AIRSPACE SYSTEM”**

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Chairman Nehls, Ranking Member Carson, and Members of the Subcommittee on Aviation, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. On behalf of the National Association of State Aviation Officials (NASAO), we greatly appreciate your continued commitment to small community air service and the strong legislative framework established by the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-63), which guides today's conversation.

NASAO represents state government aviation agencies in all 50 states, Guam, and Puerto Rico. These agencies oversee aviation systems at the state level, including planning, development, safety, and regulation of airports and aviation activities. In communities large and small, NASAO's members provide financial and technical support to airports, conduct safety inspections, and advocate for the needs of airports that are essential to local mobility, economic opportunity, and public service. Together, state government aviation agencies help oversee and support thousands of public-use airports that are the nation's small community air service network.

State government aviation agencies play a direct, though varying, role in supporting air service in small and rural communities, shaped by each state's statutory authority, resources, and priorities. They provide financial support and technical expertise to small and general aviation airports that often lack the staffing and expertise available to large airports. In addition, eight states have initiated targeted incentive programs to help airports attract and retain scheduled passenger air service. These efforts complement federal programs by offering flexible, locally responsive support tailored to the needs of individual communities.

State government aviation agencies are on the front lines of the infrastructure and service challenges facing small community airports, and NASAO's perspective reflects the direct experience of those agencies working every day to support aviation access in communities across the country.

Continued Support Needed for Federal Programs for Small Community Air Service

Small community air service is under growing strain, and continued federal support is critical. The Essential Air Service (EAS) program remains an important resource for many communities, but it has not evolved in step with changes in the economy and airline industry. Aircraft economics, airport connectivity, airline cost structures, and infrastructure realities have changed substantially since the program was designed. As a result, some communities that once successfully exited EAS prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and its disruption of air travel, now find themselves unable to maintain commercial air service under current market conditions yet they face major barriers to reentering the program.

The FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (P.L. 112-95) locked many of these communities out of EAS, leaving them with no path back when air service is reduced, suspended, or lost. In effect, communities that did the right thing and grew beyond the

need for EAS can now be penalized for that success when market conditions shift against them.

When EAS works as intended, the results are significant. Jackson Regional Airport in Tennessee is a clear example. Prior to EAS-supported service, the airport struggled with unreliable service that pushed business travelers, healthcare professionals, and residents to drive to larger airports rather than depend on local flights. Through EAS, dependable air service has since allowed local businesses to expand into new markets, improved physician recruitment for the regional healthcare system, and given residents reliable access to the national air transportation network. In its first full year of service, the airport recorded over 10,000 enplanements, a 224 percent increase over the prior year, and is on pace to reach nearly 16,000 in 2026. The airport is now looking at terminal and infrastructure expansions to meet continued growth.

At the same time, the Small Community Air Service Development (SCASD) program remains a valuable complement to EAS because many communities do not have the local resources needed to proactively attract or retain service on their own. Elko, Nevada, demonstrates precisely why the SCASD program is essential for communities that fall outside the EAS program's eligibility criteria but still need federal support to sustain meaningful air service. SCASD enabled the Elko Regional Airport to restore its midday flight, which had been eliminated during the COVID-19 pandemic due to reduced demand and the broader disruptions that reshaped air service across small markets. Without SCASD, Elko would not be able to sustain its current twice-daily schedule. The SCASD program continues to provide grants to help communities address air service and airfare challenges. However, the U.S. Government Accountability Office recently found that small communities generally experienced fewer departing flights between 2018 and 2023 even as average seats per departure increased, underscoring the pressure these markets continue to face.¹

For these reasons, Congress should continue funding both EAS and SCASD at no less than their full authorized levels in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-63). Congress should also amend the EAS eligibility provisions in the FAA Modernization and Reform Act of 2012 (P. L. 112-95) so that communities that exited the program, but later lost service have a reasonable path to reenter. Any reentry framework should reflect today's airline industry and market environment rather than assumptions that existed when a community first left the program.

Continued Support for Federal Airports to Address Infrastructure Gaps

Infrastructure is another major obstacle. At many small community airports, commercial terminals are aging, undersized, and increasingly unable to accommodate larger aircraft or

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, Commercial Aviation: Certain Nonhub Airports Face Significant Challenges in Securing and Maintaining Air Service, GAO-26-107751, December 2025

meet current Transportation Security Administration (TSA) security requirements. Modernization costs are substantial, and unlike at large commercial airports, airlines serving small regional airports rarely share significantly in those capital costs. Meanwhile, airlines have increasingly moved toward larger aircraft and less frequent service.

That trend creates real challenges for passengers and communities. Replacing smaller, more frequent flights with larger, less frequent flights can make service less useful for business travelers, reduce schedule flexibility, and leave passengers with fewer options when delays or cancellations occur. Small communities are often stuck in a chicken-and-egg dilemma: growth in passenger demand is needed to justify larger aircraft, but the infrastructure needed to support those aircraft must already be in place before that growth can happen. At the same time, the aging regional jet fleet is becoming less reliable, making it harder to sustain consistent service and eroding confidence in smaller markets.

General aviation airports face parallel infrastructure challenges. These airports are among the most underutilized and underfunded assets in the national aviation system, yet they may be the most practical near-term platforms for early advanced air mobility (AAM) deployment, which, when integrated into the broader transportation system, could expand access for people in communities that have long been underserved. Realizing that potential, however, will require investment.

State government aviation agencies collectively invest in planning, operations, infrastructure development, maintenance, and navigational aids at approximately 5,000 airports across the country, illustrating the scale of the system that depends on sustained support. The Nonprimary Entitlement (NPE) program currently provides eligible general aviation, reliever, and nonprimary commercial service airports up to \$150,000 annually to airports in the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS). In practice, that amount falls far short of the cost of most pavement, safety, and utility projects, which can easily begin at \$1 million or more. As a result, many airports must carry over multiple years of funds just to address a single need, delaying safety improvements and limiting their ability to plan for future technologies.

Preparing these airports for electric and hybrid-electric aircraft will require even more investment. Electrical capacity upgrades, new communications systems, and updated navigational aids will all be necessary. Current funding levels are insufficient to meet today's needs, let alone future demands.

For these reasons, NASAO urges Congress to continue supporting robust Airport Improvement Program funding at the full \$4 billion authorized level under the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-63). This funding is essential, but long-term sustainability will also require updates to the NPE program. NASAO encourages Congress to raise the maximum annual NPE apportionment above the current \$150,000 cap. At the same time, we must not rely solely on annual appropriations to address these infrastructure challenges. It will be critical for Congress, the Administration, and state,

tribal, local, and territorial governments to work together to create a sustainable, long-term funding model for general aviation airport infrastructure.

Integrating Advanced Air Mobility as Part of the Broader Rural Transportation Solution

Advanced Air Mobility (AAM) presents a significant long-term opportunity for small and rural communities to connect to the broader transportation network. AAM should be viewed as a mobility tool that can be combined with both traditional aviation and surface transportation systems. Electric battery, hydrogen-fueled, and hybrid aircraft may eventually provide a replacement for aging 50-to-70-seat regional aircraft and reshape air service options for smaller markets, but realizing the potential will require coordinated planning across agencies and modes.

Small airports are not currently positioned to support AAM operations. Charging and fueling infrastructure, upgraded power systems, and new navigational aids will all be required before these aircraft can operate at scale. These investments present an opportunity to align Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA) programs, and other U.S. Department of Transportation programs to support more integrated cost-effective rural mobility solutions.

While AAM is not a near-term solution to current small community air service challenges, the planning and infrastructure decisions made today will determine whether small and rural communities can benefit from it when the technology matures. Communities that do not begin preparing now risk being left behind as deployment concentrates in better-funded and better-prepared areas.

That is why Congress should ensure full and timely implementation of AAM-related provisions in the FAA Reauthorization Act of 2024 (P.L. 118-63), including support for electric, hydrogen, and hybrid aircraft infrastructure. Congress should also fully fund the AAM Infrastructure Pilot Program (Sec. 101 of division Q of P.L. 117-328), which provides planning support for state, tribal, and local governments preparing for AAM infrastructure needs. Early planning is critical to ensure these communities are positioned to fully leverage emerging AAM technologies. The House Appropriations Committee included funding for this program in the FY 2027 Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies appropriations bill, and NASAO urges Congress to support that funding in a final spending bill.

Rebuilding the Regional Aircraft Pipeline for Long-Term Connectivity

Another structural challenge that deserves much greater attention is the decline of the regional aircraft fleet that underpins service to many small communities. Without a viable next-generation aircraft in the 19-to-76-seat range, long-term connectivity for many communities is at serious risk, regardless of how well federal programs are funded. Larger aircraft generally offer lower seat-mile costs, making them more attractive to airlines. At

the same time, the 50-seat regional jet fleet is aging toward the end of its useful life, and there is no true replacement currently in production ready to fill that gap. Meanwhile, labor and gate constraints at hub airports are reinforcing this trend, further encouraging airlines to operate fewer, larger aircraft instead of maintaining more frequent, small-aircraft service. Together, these issues are systematically narrowing the pathway for small and rural communities to maintain reliable air service. If left unaddressed, this shift will accelerate the loss of connectivity in rural and smaller regions.

Congress and the Administration should engage aerospace manufacturers to identify the specific barriers preventing new regional aircraft from entering the market. While some next-generation concepts are under development, including aircraft that incorporate some aspects of AAM technologies, progress has been slow and uncertain. A targeted federal effort is needed to assess certification hurdles, production challenges, and market disincentives.

That assessment should lead to a focused review of regulatory and policy options that could reduce barriers to entry or provide meaningful incentives for manufacturers, including certification support, regulatory reform, and other targeted actions. A coordinated effort across the U.S. Department of Transportation, the FAA, and industry stakeholders is necessary if we are serious about preserving connectivity for small communities over the long term.

Addressing the Pilot Shortage

Recruitment of commercial pilots has remained a challenge across the industry. Regional airlines had already been facing a pilot shortage for several years before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the pandemic fueled a wave of pilot retirements that caused the shortage to become an acute problem.

As air travel demand rebounded, major airlines began hiring pilots quickly, many of whom came from regional airlines. This acute pilot shortage severely limited regional airlines' ability to serve small communities, leading to small markets losing a portion or all their service.

NASAO urges Congress to continue its oversight of the FAA Reauthorization of 2024 (P.L. 118-63) to ensure the timely implementation of key provisions, including Section 372, which requires the FAA to establish requirements for the Enhanced Qualification Program (EQP) under which air carriers are certified to provide enhanced training for pilots seeking to obtain restricted airline transport certificates. NASAO also urges Congress to support increased opportunities for pilot training, including making pilot training eligible for federal loan programs.

A National Strategy is Needed to Fully Address These Challenges

At the same time, these individual issues point to a broader truth: the nation needs a coordinated strategy for small community air service. Many of the challenges facing small and rural communities have persisted for years because they are structural. Manufacturing limitations, infrastructure shortfalls, funding constraints, security requirements, and workforce shortages all interact with one another. No single program can solve them in isolation. Addressing these challenges requires a whole-of-government approach that aligns policy and funding across agencies. State government aviation agencies must have a meaningful seat at the table because they are essential implementation partners.

Congress should direct the U.S. Department of Transportation and the FAA, working with TSA and other relevant agencies, to develop and implement a coordinated national strategy for small community air service. This effort should include a review of existing federal programs, identify actionable recommendations, and define clear roles for each federal entity. It should also be informed by input from state and local governments and private-sector stakeholders who understand these operational realities firsthand. This is a process that worked well leading up to the U.S. Department of Transportation's recent promulgation of the AAM National Strategy. A similar level of focus and cross-agency coordination is now urgently needed to ensure that small and rural communities are not left behind in the nation's aviation system.

In closing, the challenges facing small community air service are structural, compounding, and urgent, but they are not beyond solving. With the right mix of near-term investment, policy reform, and long-term strategy, Congress can help ensure that smaller communities remain connected to the national aviation system. NASAO is committed to working with Congress and the FAA to advance these priorities on behalf of state government aviation agencies and the communities they serve.

Thank you again for your leadership and your continued focus on the needs of small communities in our national aviation system. I would be happy to answer any questions and discuss further any of the issues raised in this testimony.