

Aviation Advisory Board Meeting Minutes

March 20th 2024

Juneau, AK

And Virtual via Zoom

Present: Steve Strait, Adam White, Dennis Parrish, Gideon Garcia, Frank Neitz, Marilyn Romano, Mike Reeve, Dave Wilson, Jim Dodson

Others Present: Angie Spear (AIA), Jeremy Worall (DOTPF), Troy LaRue (DOTPF), Kari Hebert (DOTPF), Merle Acres (Public), Dylan Blankenship (DOTPF), Keith DeBarry (NATA), Greg Dyer (Woolpert), Kip Spurio (Collins Aerospace)

1. Minutes and Agenda

Steve Strait opened the meeting by proposing a few changes to the agenda. He suggested adding a discussion on rural lighting status under construction updates and moving the public comment section to the end of the agenda. Gideon Garcia seconded these motions, and the revised agenda was unanimously approved. Following the agenda approval, Marilyn Romano motioned to approve the minutes from the previous meeting. This motion was seconded by Gideon Garcia, and the minutes were adopted without any objections.

2. Safety and Security Updates

Steve Strait emphasized the board's ongoing commitment to enhancing safety protocols across all airports, with a particular focus on rural locations. He raised concerns about the readiness of staff to handle emergencies and the need for updated training and equipment.

Winter Operations:

Troy LaRue provided a detailed report on the challenges faced during the winter season. He noted that changing climate conditions, shifts in fleet composition, and modifications in equipment have made winter operations increasingly complex. A significant issue discussed was the use of sand for de-icing, which has been causing damage to aircraft engines. The financial impact of these incidents, including claims for engine replacements, was highlighted as a major concern. Troy mentioned that an updated snow and ice control plan, embedded within the airport certification's Chapter 7, is being developed to address these issues. The plan will prioritize the use of chemical solutions over sand for de-icing purposes. A comprehensive meeting has been scheduled to cover topics such as staffing, resource allocation, and chemical application strategies to ensure that all airports can effectively manage winter conditions.

Emergency Preparedness:

The discussion also touched on the importance of timely reporting and response to critical equipment failures, such as the recent issue with a broken ice truck. The board recognized the need for improved communication and coordination to prevent similar incidents in the future. Troy LaRue emphasized the significance of job sharing and shadowing programs, allowing staff from well-performing airports to assist those struggling with winter operations.

3. Presentation by RTX (Raytheon Technologies)

The meeting featured a presentation by representatives from Raytheon Technologies (RTX), who provided an overview of their latest advancements in aviation technology and infrastructure. The presentation focused on several key areas:

Advanced Weather Systems:

RTX introduced their cutting-edge weather systems designed to enhance safety and efficiency at airports, particularly in regions prone to severe weather conditions like Alaska. These systems include advanced radar technology and real-time data analytics, which provide more accurate and timely weather forecasts. The RTX team demonstrated how these systems could be integrated into existing airport infrastructure to improve decision-making during adverse weather events.

Air Traffic Management Solutions:

The presentation also covered RTX's innovations in air traffic management (ATM) systems. The new ATM solutions are designed to increase the capacity and efficiency of airspace while maintaining high safety standards. The RTX team highlighted how these systems could be particularly beneficial for Alaska's unique airspace, which handles a significant amount of cargo and passenger traffic despite its remote and challenging environment. The technology allows for more precise aircraft tracking and conflict resolution, reducing delays and improving overall airspace management.

Environmental Sustainability Initiatives:

RTX representatives discussed their ongoing efforts to promote environmental sustainability in the aviation sector. They presented their latest developments in green technologies, such as energy-efficient ground support equipment and alternative fuel sources. These initiatives are part of RTX's broader commitment to reducing the carbon footprint of aviation operations. The board expressed interest in how these technologies could be implemented in Alaskan airports, particularly in reducing energy costs and enhancing sustainability in remote locations.

Partnership Opportunities:

The presentation concluded with a discussion on potential partnership opportunities between RTX and Alaskan airports. RTX is interested in collaborating with the state to pilot their new technologies in challenging environments, providing Alaska with early access to the latest advancements in aviation technology. The board acknowledged the potential benefits of such partnerships and agreed to explore further discussions with RTX to identify specific projects that could be mutually beneficial.

4. Airport Governance Committee Update

Marilyn Romano provided a comprehensive update on the ongoing efforts of the Airport Governance Committee, which has been tasked with exploring alternative governance structures for Alaska's major airports, particularly Anchorage (ANC) and Fairbanks (FAI). The committee's work is driven by the need to enhance operational efficiency, improve safety protocols, and better align the airports' management with state-wide transportation goals.

Committee Composition and Stakeholder Involvement:

Marilyn began by outlining the composition of the committee, which includes key members from the Alaska International Airport System (AIAS) Airport Affairs Committee, as well as other significant stakeholders in the state's aviation sector. These members bring a diverse set of perspectives and expertise to the table, ensuring that all aspects of airport governance are thoroughly considered. Marilyn emphasized the importance of obtaining consensus among these members, as well as top state leaders, including Commissioner Ryan Anderson of the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF) and Tyson Gallagher, the Governor's chief of staff.

Focus Areas and Objectives:

The committee's primary objective is to assess and recommend governance structures that could improve the operational efficiency and safety of ANC and FAI. This includes evaluating current management practices, exploring alternative models (such as public-private partnerships or regional airport authorities), and considering how changes could impact both large and small airports across the state.

Marilyn highlighted that the committee is particularly focused on ensuring that any proposed changes will enhance the ability of these airports to support Alaska's economic development, given their critical roles as transportation hubs in the state. The committee is also addressing operational challenges, such as the need for updated infrastructure and technology, improved staff training, and enhanced security measures.

Upcoming Key Meetings:

Marilyn reported that the committee has scheduled several crucial meetings with state officials, including Commissioner Anderson and Governor Mike Dunleavy. These meetings are expected to be pivotal in securing the necessary support for any proposed changes to the governance structure. The committee plans to present concrete examples and data to demonstrate the potential benefits of the proposed changes, such as increased efficiency, cost savings, and improved safety outcomes.

Challenges and Considerations for Smaller Airports:

During the discussion, committee member Tom George raised the issue of whether the governance challenges facing ANC and FAI are also relevant to smaller airports in Alaska.

Marilyn acknowledged that while smaller airports do face unique challenges, the current focus of the committee must remain on the larger international airports, given their strategic importance and the complexity of their operations.

However, Marilyn also noted that the committee is mindful of the broader implications of their work. She emphasized the need to keep the focus on the unique funding and operational structures of ANC and FAI but mentioned that future discussions could expand to include smaller airports. Marilyn referenced the ongoing efforts by the Governor's task force on food security and logistics, which include rural infrastructure improvements, as an example of how the state is addressing broader transportation and infrastructure challenges.

Timeline and Next Steps:

The committee is on track with its timeline and expects to make significant progress in the coming months. The upcoming meetings with Commissioner Anderson and Governor Dunleavy are anticipated to be critical in determining the next steps in the process. Marilyn stressed the importance of these discussions in ensuring that the committee's recommendations are aligned with state priorities and have the necessary political and administrative support to be implemented.

Conclusion:

Marilyn concluded her report by reaffirming the committee's commitment to finding a governance solution that best serves the interests of Alaska's aviation sector and the broader public. She emphasized that the work being done now is foundational and will have long-term impacts on the state's transportation infrastructure. The committee remains dedicated to exploring all viable options and is prepared to engage with stakeholders at all levels to ensure the successful implementation of any recommended changes.

Focus on Smaller Airports:

During the discussion, Tom George inquired about the relevance of the committee's work to smaller airports, which face their own unique challenges. Marilyn acknowledged these challenges but stressed that the current focus must remain on the International Airport system. However, she did express a willingness to engage in future conversations about addressing issues at smaller airports, particularly those related to safety and infrastructure. Marilyn also mentioned ongoing efforts by the Governor's task force on food security and logistics, which include discussions on rural infrastructure improvements. The committee is committed to addressing one piece of the puzzle at a time, ensuring that any changes made are sustainable and beneficial for the state's aviation system as a whole.

5. Construction Updates

Fairbanks Airport Projects:

Angie Spear, the Fairbanks Airport Manager, provided an update on the major construction projects underway at the airport. The primary focus has been on the general aviation apron and taxiway reconstruction. Although most of the paving work is complete, delays in transformer

delivery have pushed the final completion date to early summer 2024. To ensure continued operations during the winter, temporary power sources have been arranged. Angie also mentioned the expansion of the rental car invitation process, which now includes eight counters, including Alaska 4 by 4.

Air Service and Tower Construction:

Angie reported that while summer air service levels were slightly below pre-pandemic levels, fall traffic numbers exceeded those of 2019 by 10-15%. She highlighted efforts to develop new air services, including charters from Japan Airlines and potential routes to Korea and China. Additionally, the new air traffic control tower project is progressing well, with regulatory testing for the employee screening program currently underway. However, staffing challenges persist, particularly in skilled positions such as operations officers, electricians, and plumbers. Despite ongoing recruitment efforts, low pay and state requirements continue to hinder the hiring process. To mitigate these issues, a contractor has been hired to provide operations support, and emergency training contracts have been executed to ensure operational readiness during diversionary events. New hires include a safety officer and an environmental manager, both of whom will play key roles in maintaining airport operations.

Addressing Staffing Challenges:

During the discussion, Marilyn Romano raised concerns about the qualifications required for certain positions, particularly operations officers. She highlighted a case where a qualified individual was deemed unqualified by the state due to lacking the required seven years of experience, despite holding relevant certifications. Marilyn questioned who is responsible for reviewing these qualifications. Angie clarified that this responsibility falls under the Department of Administration, but noted that class studies to update qualifications can take up to two years, with uncertain outcomes. Troy LaRue suggested conducting a study to compare the roles of Operations and SSO, and Steve Strait recommended inviting HR staff to the February meeting to address any questions or concerns related to staffing qualifications.

6. Public Comment

Representation Concerns:

Merle Acres, a member of the public, expressed concerns about the representation on various aviation committees. He questioned the lack of representation for general aviation, particularly in relation to signatory airlines, and sought more transparency in the decision-making process. Merle also raised concerns about the recent rate increase for seaplane base permits, pointing out disparities in rates and usage at the airport. He emphasized the need for a more equitable approach to rate assessments, suggesting that all users should contribute their fair share to the maintenance and operation of the airport.

NATA:

Keith DeBerry gave a brief on NATA and how it could help with Alaskan Aviation.

6. Board Comments

Wage Disparities at Fairbanks Airport:

Jim Dodson brought attention to the ongoing issue of wage disparities at Fairbanks Airport. He emphasized that these disparities are affecting the airport's ability to attract and retain skilled workers, particularly in critical positions such as equipment operators and maintenance staff. Jim acknowledged the efforts of Marilyn's committee to address these issues but stressed the need for involvement from the legislature and the governor to find a timely and effective solution. The board discussed the possibility of advocating for competitive wages and improved working conditions across all airports, recognizing that this issue is not unique to Fairbanks but affects the entire state.

Essential Air Service (EAS) Funding:

Mike Reeve added comments on the importance of maintaining funding levels for the Essential Air Service (EAS) program, particularly as costs continue to rise. He noted the unique challenges faced by Alaska, where smaller communities may receive EAS for only two flights a week. Mike emphasized the need for ground-based receiver stations in areas lacking radar coverage, citing the installation of one such station in the Copper Valley as a positive development. He also highlighted the FAA's efforts to install nine new ground-based ADS-B stations across Alaska, which will expand coverage in various regions, including Gulkana, Kodiak, the Tanana Peninsula, and the Yukon Flats.

Weather and Runway Conditions:

Frank Neitz from Bethel provided updates on the weather conditions in his region, mentioning the freeze-up of the Cusco Quain River and the completion of runway work in Kipnuk. He expressed anticipation for a significant winter at Shefonik and highlighted the importance of maintaining clear and consistent runway conditions. The board acknowledged the challenges posed by Alaska's harsh winter conditions and the need for continued investment in infrastructure and maintenance.

Meeting Adjourned:

The meeting was adjourned at 3:45 PM by Steve Strait, with plans to reconvene at the next scheduled meeting.

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