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May 8, 2015

The Honorable John Thune
Chairman
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate
511 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Bill Nelson
Ranking Member
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate
716 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kelly Ayotte
Chairman
Subcommittee on Aviation Operations,
Safety, and Security
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate
144 Russell Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Aviation Operations,
Safety, and Security
Committee on Commerce, Science,
and Transportation
United States Senate
511 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Thune, Ranking Member Nelson, Chair Ayotte, and Ranking Member Cantwell:

I would like to thank you and your colleagues on the Senate Aviation Subcommittee for discussing the pilot shortage issue during your recent hearing on aviation safety. Although the American Association of Airport Executives didn't participate in that particular session, this is an issue of utmost importance to our members, the men and women who manage the nation's airports.

As you know, a number of small- and medium-sized communities are continuing to experience commercial air service reductions, in part, because carriers say that there are not enough qualified pilots to operate their flights. While some suggest that the problem doesn't exist, that point of view doesn't reflect what is happening outside of Washington. In fact, there is a growing catalogue of service reductions at airports in all parts of the country.

The Tulsa International Airport learned earlier this year that it would be losing flights to two major airline hubs this summer. Airline officials attributed the reduction to the pilot shortage and the new 1,500-hour rule. Another regional airline recently canceled three flights into and out of Manchester-Boston Regional Airport due to the unavailability of flight crews.

Not surprisingly, small- and medium-sized communities with service from regional airlines are feeling the brunt of the pilot shortage. Mainline carriers often tap pilots from the regional airlines that provide service to smaller communities. So a number of airport directors at small- and medium-sized facilities are concerned that this trend could make it more challenging for

them to attract and retain commercial air service.

To complicate matters, a large number of pilots are also expected to retire in the next several years. InterVistas Consulting Group estimates that 16,000 pilots at the big four U.S. carriers will retire between now and 2022. In 2013, Boeing estimated that the airlines around the world will need to hire almost 500,000 pilots by 2032 -- or about 25,000 annually.

In recent testimony, the Regional Airline Association pointed out that the pilot shortage will likely force regional carriers to convert to larger aircraft and reduce the number of smaller aircraft that traditionally serve small- and medium-sized communities.

“Without sufficient pilots to operate all of an airlines’ equipment, smaller communities across the nation will unquestionably lose air service,” RAA warned. “This air service represents a key economic driver by providing direct and indirect jobs for Americans as well as ensuring the connectivity needed to remain competitive.”

The regional airlines maintain that the rule requiring first officers to have at least 1,500 hours of flight time is contributing to the pilot shortage and is creating some “far-reaching, unintended consequences.” The carriers have also suggested that there may be alternative pathways that could actually enhance aviation safety and reduce the negative impact on service to smaller communities.

We realize that the pilot shortage may not be the only factor impacting service to small- and medium-sized communities. Airline consolidation and the retirement of right-sized aircraft may also be adding to air service challenges. But it’s clear that we need to take steps to address the pilot shortage and the other issues impacting service to small- and medium-sized communities before the impact is felt more acutely in communities across the country.

Airports would like to work with you and other aviation stakeholders to ensure that there are enough pilots in the pipeline to accommodate rising demand and to fill the seats of those who are expected to retire. Working together we can also ensure that people who live in smaller communities continue to have access to our national aviation system.

Unfortunately, there are no easy solutions, but work is being undertaken to identify potential steps that could be taken to ease the shortage. We look forward to working with you to address these issues as Congress crafts FAA reauthorization legislation in the months ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Todd Hauptli". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Todd Hauptli
President & CEO
AAAE