PROFESSIONAL AVIATION SAFETY SPECIALISTS

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OPPOSE PRIVATIZATION OF THE AIR TRAFFIC CONTROL SYSTEM

The Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, AFL-CIO (PASS), the union that represents 11,000 Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) employees, is opposed to privatization of the air traffic control system. In early June, the Trump administration released a proposal to spin off air traffic control from the FAA into a private monopoly that would oversee aircraft in flight and take over modernization of the aviation system. Later that month, Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, introduced his own legislation (H.R.2997) to overhaul our country's air traffic control system, placing the safety of the flying public into the hands of a corporate board of directors. In the Senate, lawmakers opted not to endorse risky privatization schemes and introduced an FAA bill that strengthens the agency and implements timely reforms. Currently, the United States has the safest, largest, and most complex aviation system in the world and that system should continue to be operated solely for the public's benefit and safety, not for the benefit of a board of directors dominated by special interest groups. We cannot jeopardize the integrity and safety of our aviation system for an experiment that has no guarantee of success. This country's air traffic control system must continue to be a function of the federal government.

PASS is opposed to air traffic control privatization for the following reasons:

- Real progress is being made to modernize our airspace through the Next Generation Air Transportation System (NextGen), a complex intra-agency revitalization project. Privatizing the system at this critical point would interrupt the open communication between FAA units and bring that modernization process to a standstill during the transition period. The United States should not willingly undergo an unnecessary transition with no guarantee of success when the current system is not broken.

- Under the current proposal in the House of Representatives, the private air traffic control entity would be entirely funded by an unknown user fee scheme, which will be determined by a board of directors dominated by corporate interests. The proposal does not include sufficient details on the privatized system's financing mechanism to ensure that there will be an adequately trained and fully staffed workforce; that aging facility needs will be addressed; and that progress on NextGen will not be deferred.

- The FAA's current funding structure utilizes the Airport and Airway Trust Fund (AATF) along with a general fund appropriation. The AATF is primarily funded through excise taxes paid by passengers and should therefore remain in the public trust. Additionally, the general fund serves as a critical safety net for the air traffic control system and the flying public in times of national emergency and economic downturns.

- Privatized models in other countries with far smaller and less complex aviation systems went through “growing pains,” which included, among other things, financial bailouts, decreases in service and staffing cuts. In 2016, the Government Accountability Office found that the transition from public to private governance in much smaller countries took as many as seven years to complete. Chairman Shuster’s proposal claims the transition will take just three years. At this critical point in aviation modernization, the United States cannot afford to halt progress for a baseless, years-long scheme with no guarantee of success.

- Under the Shuster plan, the new entity would determine all user fees, subject to the approval of the secretary of Transportation. In effect, the reform shifts control of revenues from Congress and the American people to the Department of Transportation and, ultimately, the White House.

- If operational and user fee decisions are made either to advance or harm the interests of certain users of the system, the organization’s attention will quickly shift away from what should be the only focus of those responsible for aviation in this country: the safety of the flying public and the efficient operation of the system.

- The typical economic argument for privatization is that a service will be open to competition and the providers of that service will be forced to be more efficient and less costly. Privatization of the air traffic control system is unlikely to make the system more efficient or less costly simply because it is transferred from a governmental entity to a private nonprofit monopoly. Here, the services will not be open to competition. Instead, the only significant change is that oversight of the services will ultimately move from the American people and their elected representatives, to an appointed board of directors. In actuality, the ability for stakeholders and members of Congress to work together on aviation-related issues has been pivotal to the success of our system.

- Under H.R.2997, air traffic services would be separated from the federal government, which would add layers of difficulty to the important relationship and coordination that occurs between the FAA and other federal agencies. For example, in the event of a national emergency or natural disaster, the FAA and Department of Defense protect the National Airspace System (NAS) in tandem by sharing airspace, training systems, assets, equipment and information. This is made possible by their mutual status as federal agencies within the U.S. government.

- In addition, we do not believe that the Air Traffic Organization (ATO) should be separated from the other lines of business within the FAA because the ATO is inextricably intertwined with the agency’s other functional divisions. For example, communication and sharing of information and resources within the agency, including between the ATO and the Office of Aviation Safety (AVS), are essential to allow the agency to seamlessly perform work necessary to ensure safety every step of the way. The FAA must remain one cohesive unit in order to allow all FAA employees to continue working together for the benefit of the world’s foremost aviation system.

- Taxpayers have invested over $50 billion in more than 500 air traffic control towers, hundreds of radar and communication facilities, and more than 70,000 pieces of air traffic control equipment over the last 20 years that, under the House proposal, would be handed over to a private monopoly for free. Additionally, in 2016, the Congressional Budget Office determined that the plan to privatize the U.S. air traffic control system would increase the deficit by nearly $20 billion over 10 years. It remains unclear how creating a costly entity that is essentially “too big to fail” will benefit the flying public or enhance the safety of the system.

The federal employees at the FAA represented by PASS are committed to ensuring the safety and efficiency of this country’s aviation system. Now is the time to continue moving forward with modernization efforts, growing our airspace, and allowing for the introduction of new technologies, and doing so with a cohesive and expertly-skilled group of federal employees ensuring safety every step of the way.