

“Tiny airports provide big services in Alaska”

Christine E. Klein, AAE – Deputy Commissioner, Alaska Department of Transportation & Public Facilities – Aviation & Airports.

Recently the Department of Transportation & Public Facilities (DOT&PF) in Alaska received \$61 Million from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to supplement infrastructure funding at airports. Three airports in Alaska, Ouzinkie, Akiachak and Fort Yukon each received the maximum \$15 million stimulus grant. Some of our airports may be remote and tiny but they provide big services to their communities. In a large state with few if any roads connecting most of it, airports are critical to survival.

To address some misinformation we have heard, I would like to clarify a few points. Airport projects are only eligible for economic stimulus funds if they have already been ranked by FAA and the sponsor as high priorities; they have not received federal funding; and, are ready to construct within 30 days. Stimulus grants are an opportunity to fund much needed projects that may not have received funding otherwise. Our small but critical Alaskan airport projects ranked high because they serve as the *only* transportation access and, a lifeline for citizens of those communities to supplies, mail, and medical service.

Regarding why the largest and busiest airports in the country are not getting stimulus funds—actually they did and have received federal funds. Medium and large hub airports get a substantial percentage of federal funds already, based on the numbers of passengers and cargo that use these airports. The larger airports prioritize and choose where their allocation of federal airport entitlement and formula funds are spent; therefore, our large airports do have a substantial part and say in the use of available federal funds.

Earlier this year DOT&PF completed an economic assessment quantifying the major contribution that aviation makes to Alaska. The report also compared Alaska’s dependence on aviation with similar rural communities in the Lower 48 states. Residents of Alaska’s rural communities fly eight times more than their Lower 48 counterparts and receive 1,100 pounds of supplies per person annually or 39 times more freight by air. More than 170 communities just in the northern half of Alaska rely solely on aviation for access, essential supplies, mail, schools, medical/dental services and travel.

According to one rural Alaska resident, “If we didn’t have the airport we wouldn’t have anything. The airport is a fact of life for living out here in the villages. The airport is our roads, highway, ocean – our lifeline.”

In the case of many rural Alaskan communities, most rely on aviation. Airports in Alaska often provide the only access, unlike other parts of our country where roads, rail, ferry, or other transportation are options. These small airports serve as the main transportation network that is relied on across a vast land with many

widely diverse regions, geography, and climatic conditions. It is expensive to build, reconstruct, and maintain these airports. DOTPF provides equipment, manpower and must maintain runways that are frequently affected by extreme weather conditions that include spring flooding, permafrost, frost heaves, severe icing and record snow falls.

Funding decisions for Alaska's 256 rural airports are firmly based on safety and efficiency priorities. Statewide Aviation works closely with the FAA and stakeholders to identify airports that need immediate attention and on behalf of all of the state's rural airports we are extremely thankful for this financial assistance.

Alaska has the largest aviation system in the U.S. Our mission at the DOT&PF is to provide for the safe movement of people and goods and the delivery of state services. It may be important for others' to realize that in our state, the primary mode and often only mode of transportation is aviation. Thank you for this opportunity.