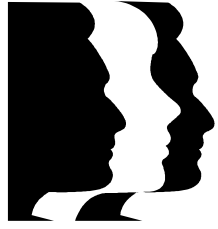


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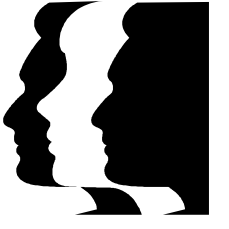


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Feds Keep Little-used Airports in Business

Local subsidies help private airplane owners avoid landing fees and passenger taxes.

by Thomas Frank
USA Today
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Williamsburg, Ky. — One of the USA's newest airports has a 5,500-foot lighted runway, a Colonial-style terminal with white columns, and hundreds of acres for growth. But Kentucky's Williamsburg-Whitley County Airport lacks one feature: airline passengers.

Built using \$11 million in federal money, the airport is used only by private airplanes. Many are piston-engine aircraft owned by residents such as Keith Brasher, the airport board chairman who keeps his two-seat Cessna in the airport hangar. On a typical day, the airport has just two or three flights, manager Jessica Roberts says. Some days, there are none.

The Williamsburg airport is

the result of an obscure federal program that raises billions of dollars a year through taxes on every airplane ticket sold in the United States. The taxes can add up to 15% to the cost of a flight — or about \$29 to a \$200 round-trip ticket.

Federal lawmakers have used some of the money to build and maintain the world's most expensive and expensive network of airports — 2,834 of them na-

tionwide — with no scheduled passenger flights. Known as general-aviation airports, they operate separately from the 139 well-known commercial airports that handle almost all passenger flights.

In the first full accounting of the 28-year-old Airport Improvement Program, USA TODAY found that Congress has directed \$15 billion to general-aviation airports, which typically are tucked on country roads and industrial byways.

Members of Congress say the general-aviation airports can attract development and provide services such as air-medical transport.

The lawmakers also regularly use general-aviation airports to get around their districts and states, sometimes in planes with lobbyists. Members of Congress took 2,154 trips on corporate-owned jets from 2001 to 2006, according to a 2006 study by Political-MoneyLine, an independent research group.

Critics say the number of subsidized airports with no commercial flights is excessive at a time when larger airports are struggling to deal with delays in air traffic, and that much of the money the general-aviation airports get benefits only a few private pilots.

"Congressmen are spending millions building runways at these little airports. That is just a complete waste of money," says Jonathan Ornstein, CEO of Mesa Air

Group, a regional air carrier. "There is a huge requirement to overhaul infrastructure at major airports."

General-aviation airports handle mostly recreational planes and corporate jets — usually just a few each hour. Half of the airports are within 20 miles of another private-aviation airport, a USA TODAY analysis shows.

The Airport Improvement Program gives money to about 2,000 airports each year for projects such as runway repairs and noise mitigation. The money goes to all types of airports — general-aviation and commercial — that apply to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) for grants.

Lawmakers have expanded annual funding by 10 times since 1982, as increasing air travel brought in more money in ticket taxes. They also have steered growing sums to general-aviation airports by rewriting federal law.

The funding for such airports soared from \$470 million in 1999 to \$1 billion in 2007 — even as private flying declined by 19% during that period. (Even so, the USA has 231,000 private airplanes — more than twice as many as every other country in the world combined, according to the General Aviation Manufacturers Association.) This year, the small airports are receiving a record \$1.2 billion.

The escalating funding came as commercial hubs

faced the worst airline delays ever. A multibillion-dollar plan to avert gridlock in the skies has been delayed because the U.S. government has spent too little money building a new system to guide commercial flights, former Federal Aviation administrator Marion Blakey says.

The little-used airports are often in residential areas, drawing fire from neighbors who say they create noise and pollution while benefiting a small group of airplane owners.

In Carroll County, Md., 35 miles northwest of Baltimore, 1,800 people have signed petitions opposing a proposed longer runway at the Carroll County Regional Airport that would be designed to handle larger private planes.

Tad Rau, whose house is a quarter-mile from the airport next to a farm, blames the federal program, which would pay for \$70 million of the \$74 million runway.

"That's a major reason why the county commissioners want to do this — they really don't have to fund any of the cost," Rau says.

Other findings: General-aviation airports are vastly underused. A USA TODAY analysis of aviation plans in seven states indicates that more than half of their 312 general-aviation airports operate at less than 10% capacity.

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