

## **Testimony of Tracy Plessinger**

Airport Manager, Altoona–Blair County Airport (A00)  
PA Senate Transportation Committee Hearing  
“Rural Crossroads of Economy and Infrastructure”  
May 28, 2025

Chairwoman Ward, Minority Chairman Flynn, and members of the Senate Transportation Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name is Tracy Plessinger, and I serve as the Airport Manager at Altoona–Blair County Airport. It’s an honor to testify today on behalf of not just Altoona, but the more than 120 public-use airports across Pennsylvania, 15 of which provide commercial air service to Pennsylvania residents. These airports play a vital — yet often overlooked — role in connecting our rural communities to the rest of the Commonwealth, the country, and the world.

### **A Rural Airport with a Regional Footprint**

Altoona–Blair County Airport (A00) serves a rural region, but its impact extends far beyond our runway. According to the 2022 PennDOT Aviation Economic Impact Study, A00 supports 159 jobs, provides more than \$8.48 million in annual payroll, and contributes nearly \$23 million in total economic output.

These are not abstract numbers. They represent airport maintenance workers, mechanics, pilots, flight instructors, airline ground crews, hospitality staff, and small business owners—all of whom rely on the airport as a direct or indirect economic engine.

Our success story was elevated in 2024 when Contour Airlines launched jet service from Altoona to Charlotte Douglas International Airport through the federal Department of Transportation’s Essential Air Service (EAS) program. This new connection to one of American Airlines’ busiest hubs has been a game-changer for Altoona. It offers reliable, modern jet service and connects our residents and businesses to hundreds of domestic and international destinations. In addition to its previous partnership with American Airlines, Contour recently announced interline agreements with Alaska and United Airlines, allowing for seamless ticketing and baggage transfers to and from these major carriers.

The shift to Charlotte was calculated, and intentional. The Blair County Airport Authority Board identified Charlotte as the ideal hub to give our travelers more efficient connections, reduce total travel times, and expand access for businesses and families alike. Since the launch, passenger satisfaction and utilization have climbed exponentially, and the region has begun to view the airport not just as infrastructure — but as a valuable economic development asset. Thanks to the popularity of the Charlotte hub, and the reliability of Contour’s service, A00 is on track to exceed 10,000 enplanements this year for the first time since 2002. This represents an over 200% increase in year-over-year passenger numbers departing and arriving via A00.

We are deeply grateful for the partnership with Contour Airlines and the support from the EAS program. But our success remains fragile and what we’ve built could be undone with a single budget decision.

## **Rural Airports Are at a Breaking Point**

The current federal budget proposal includes a \$308 million (78%) cut to the Essential Air Service program. If enacted, it could eliminate commercial air service at five of Pennsylvania's 15 commercial airports: Altoona, Bradford, DuBois, Johnstown, and Lancaster. Four of these airports, Altoona, Bradford, Dubois, and Johnstown serve the vast, often overlooked, rural areas between the Commonwealth's major population centers to the East and West.

This loss would be devastating — not just to our airports — but more importantly to the communities and region that we serve. Losing EAS would isolate rural residents from medical treatment, business opportunities, and personal travel. It would reverse years of effort and investment, erode economic competitiveness, and damage rural Pennsylvania's long-term viability.

But even if EAS is preserved at the federal level, Altoona and airports like ours still face steep challenges that are unique to rural aviation. These include:

- ➔ Funding unpredictability, making it difficult to plan multi-year improvements or respond to emergencies.
- ➔ Ineligibility for operational support, such as airport marketing, maintenance of facilities, snow removal materials, or staffing assistance.
- ➔ Strict FAA capital restrictions, preventing investment in revenue-generating projects like hangar development or commercial pads.
- ➔ Inability to access flexible state resources due to constitutional limitations on the Motor License Fund.
- ➔ Deferred maintenance and safety upgrades, like runway lighting, fencing, or drainage systems.
- ➔ Environmental and wage requirements greatly increasing the cost of construction and maintenance projects at airports.
- ➔ Lack of resources for route retention and development, leaving us vulnerable even when service is successful.

At the end of the day, rural airports are expected to perform like transportation infrastructure, always ready to provide service, 7 days a week, 365 days a year — but we aren't funded or treated like other infrastructure resources.

## **Altoona's Resilience and Innovation**

Despite these obstacles, AOO has continued to find ways to deliver for our region. We've worked hard to align with local schools and technical programs, and the local business community to create awareness and training opportunities for aviation careers — pilots, mechanics, ground crews, customer service representatives, flight attendants, logistics specialists, aviation managers — careers that are in desperate demand across the Commonwealth and nation.

We've supported aerial firefighting, power line construction and maintenance, medical transport, police and National Guard aviation, and emerging drone operations. We've collaborated with local and regional economic development organizations to explore aviation-adjacent business attraction.

As part of serving the aviation community, and fulfilling our role as vital transportation infrastructure, AOO provides hangar space for 60 general aviation aircraft, five corporate aircraft owned and operated by major local corporations, and the Pennsylvania State Police. In addition to serving these local aircraft owners, AOO serves as the gateway for thousands of landings of general

aviation and corporate aircraft each year. These individuals and business owners travel to our region for a variety of recreational and business needs, all of which contribute to the economic viability and growth of our communities. All of this is in addition to the more than one thousand commercial flights serviced by AOO annually.

In recent years, we have also added ancillary businesses to serve our passengers and community. These businesses include a full-service restaurant, coffee shop, ATM machine, and nationally branded car rental service. Much like travel plazas on the Turnpike, these additions have made AOO a more valuable infrastructure asset and gateway for travel to and from our region.

Still, our growth and modernization are throttled by the same limitations faced by dozens of rural airports across the state.

### **The PA AIR Act: A Lifeline for Rural Aviation**

While all forms of transportation are necessary to support a vibrant and growing economy, air transportation is unique in that it does not require tens of thousands of miles of asphalt roadways or thousands of miles of iron rails. The airways are essentially free for public use. All that is required to take advantage of these free airways are safe and reliable airports to allow access to those airways. As such, airports provide a significant return on each transportation infrastructure dollar invested.

That is why the PA Aviation Investment and Reform (AIR) Act is so important—and why I'm here today asking for your support and, ultimately, your co-sponsorship of this critical legislation.

The AIR Act represents a much-needed modernization of how Pennsylvania supports its airports. At its core is an expanded and flexible Aviation Trust Fund—a fund that is not tied to FAA restrictions, bond issuance caps, or the constitutional limits of the Motor License Fund.

### **Why does that matter?**

Because right now, our funding options are narrow and inflexible. FAA dollars are critical, but they're only usable for narrowly defined capital projects. We can't use them for airport marketing, revenue strategy, or operational resilience. Motor License Fund dollars are constitutionally restricted to roads and bridges. Bonding is slow, infrequent, and often out of reach for rural projects. Capital Budget funds are limited to capital construction projects.

The Aviation Trust Fund envisioned by the AIR Act would finally give airports like Altoona a state-controlled, flexible tool to:

- ➔ Market our airport and routes to increase enplanements and grow the customer base.
- ➔ Attract new commercial or cargo service through route development funding.
- ➔ Invest in revenue-generating projects like hangars, business parks, and logistics infrastructure.
- ➔ Respond to emergency needs, such as equipment failure, storm recovery, or FAA compliance issues.
- ➔ Become more self-sufficient and less dependent on subsidies over time.

It's not just about survival—it's about sustainability and growth. The AIR Act gives us the tools to invest in ourselves and build long-term resilience.

## **Aviation Is a High-Return Investment**

As mentioned previously, aviation delivers a strong return on investment. According to the same PennDOT study, aviation in Pennsylvania generates over \$34 billion in total annual economic impact. Yet, less than 0.2% of the state's transportation budget goes toward aviation.

That gap makes no sense. When you consider that most aviation projects receive 95% federal match, every state dollar can unlock more than nine dollars in economic activity. That is arguably the most leveraged investment in our transportation portfolio.

If we are serious about rural economic development, serious about workforce mobility, and serious about infrastructure equity—aviation has to be part of the solution.

## **A Closing Ask: Co-Sponsor the PA AIR Act**

Members of the Committee: the PA AIR Act will soon be out for co-sponsorship in the General Assembly, and I urge each of you to sign on.

This bill doesn't just support large commercial hubs. It explicitly prioritizes rural, general aviation, and public-use airports that are the backbone of connectivity across this Commonwealth. It's a statement that every airport matters—whether it's in Philadelphia or Philipsburg.

For Altoona, and for so many others, this is more than policy. It is the difference between growing or withering, between connecting and isolating, between stability and constant struggle. Our experience at AOO with Contour's service to Charlotte has provided ample evidence that rural residents and businesses respond positively to affordable, convenient, reliable air service. We have seen every type of traveler take advantage of our Contour service:

- local residents traveling to Charlotte for a NASCAR race.
- college sports teams traveling to national tournaments.
- employees of major national corporations using AOO as a gateway to service their local offices and outlets.
- students and their families utilizing AOO to travel to and from local colleges and universities.
- high school wrestlers traveling from Guam for a wrestling camp at the Blair County Convention Center.

While each of these is just an anecdotal example of how AOO is being utilized by our community, taken as a whole, they demonstrate the wide variety of transportation needs that are fulfilled by AOO and other rural airports in Pennsylvania.

We are proud of the progress we've made. We are grateful for Contour's service, the Essential Air Service program, the partnerships we've built locally, and the support that the Commonwealth has provided in the past. But we cannot do it alone. The AIR Act provides the platform we need to move from dependence and decline to sustainability and growth.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share Altoona's story. I'm happy to answer any questions.