April 29, 2024

Dear Colleagues:

When we return, we will take up the FAA reauthorization bill. It is an important bill necessary to improve air travel. While the bill contains many positive features, the Senate is poised to consider a provision that could impair safety and will significantly increase delay and inconvenience experienced by the nearly 25 million passengers who use Reagan National Airport (DCA) every year. The provision will overburden the already congested main runway at DCA and, as shown by a recent near-collision at the airport, increase the risk of a serious accident there.

We have made our opposition to this provision known to Committee for a very long time. Our position, that Congress should not jam more flights onto an overburdened runway that is already the busiest in the United States, prevailed in the House. But the Senate Commerce Committee has insisted that 5 slots (a total of 10 flights) be added to the daily schedule. This is directly contrary to the advice from FAA and is opposed by the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority, established by Congress to operate DCA and Dulles. It was also agreed to with absolutely no consultation with the four Senators representing the two states with airports impacted by this.

DCA is an airport built on a small land footprint that cannot be expanded. There is one primary runway and two shorter runways designed for commuter aircraft. It was intended to be used by approximately 15 million passengers a year. Its current usage is nearly 25 million passengers a year. Because of advances in airline fleet configuration, most planes flying into DCA cannot now use the secondary runways. Nearly 90% of all flights must use the primary runway. This makes the main runway at DCA the busiest in the United States.

The passenger volume at DCA and the overuse of the main runway have made DCA one of the most congested airports in the country as measured by passenger delay. Over 20% of ingoing and outgoing flights experience delay. And the average delay experienced on those flights is already 67 minutes. DCA has functionally equivalent service, in some years more service, than Dulles International Airport even though DCA is 860 acres and Dulles is nearly 12,000 acres. DCA also ranks 3rd for airborne holds, which is when air traffic control keeps an aircraft looping in a holding pattern while the aircraft waits for an opening to land. In 2022, the airport had the 3rd worst cancellation rate among the nation's busiest airports. And these delays not only affect DCA but cause missed connection flights and other inconveniences throughout the system.
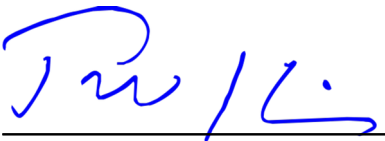
The FAA has advised the Senate that any increase in the number of operations at DCA will increase the number and duration of delays. They have assessed that the delay attributable to adding 10 flights will affect 183 flights for a total of 751 minutes (or 12 hours) of additional delay per day. When added to the existing delay, DCA would experience 12,734 minutes of delay per day! The FAA also notes that this figure does not take into account any delay that might result from gate constraints caused by adding flights.

But the delay issue is not as important as passenger safety. On April 18, there was a near miss at DCA as two planes jockeyed for position—one on the primary runway and one on a secondary runway. The planes averted a collision by a mere 300 feet. The audio from the FAA air traffic controllers is chilling—with one heard frantically yelling "Stop! Stop!" The FAA is investigating the incident, but the likelihood of a serious accident is already high at this overburdened airport and adding 10 more flights will only raise the possibility of a tragic outcome. We believe that this near miss is a bright red warning light flashing before Congress.

There are alternatives to Congress jamming in 10 more flights. The Commerce Committee settled the pilot training hours debate by deferring to the Secretary to determine how many virtual training hours are safe. In this case, Commerce, says more slots are safe. The senators representing the region, in consultation with DOT, say they aren't. Why not let the Secretary make the call?

We understand the desire of senators to shorten their commutes home, but this proposal would benefit few while impacting many, first and foremost in safety but also in delays and in reducing the economic competitiveness of smaller destinations within the perimeter. The senators representing the region and the people who most use this airport stand uniform against a provision negotiated without us that will guarantee more unacceptable delay and compromise passenger safety.

Sincerely,

Tim Kaine
United States Senator

Mark R. Warner
United States Senator

Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator

Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator