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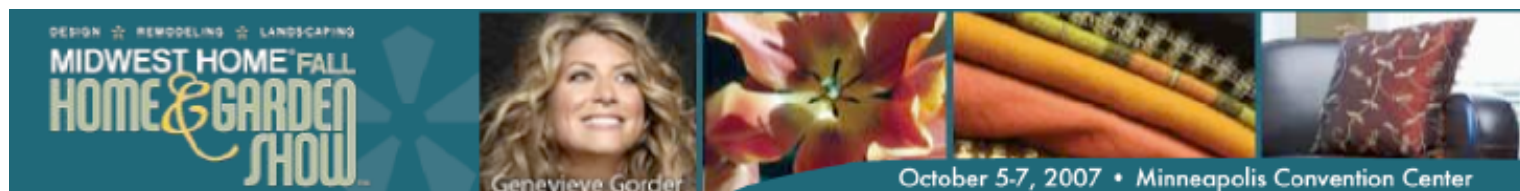
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Niel Ritchie: General aviation is not the cause of congestion

While those in this category of air traffic are willing to pay more, they shouldn't bear the burden.

Niel Ritchie


Published: September 29, 2007

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The Sept. 15 editorial "Too many delays for airline passengers" rightly notes that there is widespread agreement on the need for an upgraded air-traffic control system. The question of equity in funding the upgrades is now at the heart of the matter.

Suggestions by the major airlines that general aviation is responsible for congestion and delays in our nation's hub airports are simply not supported by the facts. General aviation accounts for less than 4 percent of the traffic at the 10 largest U.S. airports.

The populist backlash you refer to is a direct response to the Bush administration proposal to shift the tax burden from the commercial airlines to general aviation -- which consists of the individuals, small businesses and service providers who primarily use smaller planes and nonhub airports.

The stakes are high for rural America in this debate. Abandoned by the commercial airlines in the aftermath of deregulation, many rural communities depend upon general aviation for their economic survival. That is why in March, the League of Rural Voters became a founding member of the Alliance for Aviation Across America (AAAA), to fight on behalf of general aviation and those who depend upon it for a fair and equitable way to modernize our air-traffic control system.

The original FAA proposal, backed by the major airlines, called for shifting nearly \$1 billion in taxes from the commercial airlines onto the backs of general aviation, as well as for the creation of an inefficient system of new user fees on small planes and a new bureaucracy to collect them. Moreover, that proposal would have cut funding for rural airports and would have reduced overall FAA revenues by \$600 million in the first year.

The Senate Commerce Committee narrowly passed a modified version of the FAA proposal. Our membership has recently come out in support of a House proposal. It includes an increase in the fuel tax that general aviation pays but keeps the current fuel-tax system -- which is efficient and easy to use -- in place. And the money we pay into the system would be used to modernize and to generate revenue at historical levels -- not to pay for a huge tax cut for the commercial airlines.

It is important that as we move forward with FAA reauthorization, we protect general aviation, in many cases the only lifeline to small and rural communities.

Niel Ritchie, Minneapolis, is executive director of the League of Rural Voters.

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