



**Statement of Bill Dunn**

**Vice President Airports**

**Regarding**

**Crystal Airport**

**Before the**

**Minnesota Senate**

**Transportation Policy and Finance Division**

**Subcommittee on Aeronautics**

*Senator Ann H. Rest  
Chair*

**November 19, 2004**

Good afternoon Madam Chair and members of the Committee. My name is Bill Dunn, Vice President of Airports for the Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association. AOPA represents over 400,000 pilots and aircraft owners nationwide with nearly 8,000 residing in the state of Minnesota. Over one-half of our Minnesota members are based at the six-reliever airports operated by MAC, which includes Crystal. As a national association, formed over 65 years ago, AOPA has significant experience in matters such as those before you today.

We appreciate the opportunity to address you this afternoon with our views on this very important airport and general aviation in the Twin-Cities area.

As my first point, AOPA strongly opposes the proposed closing and sale of Crystal Airport. Crystal is an extremely important portion of the aviation transportation system not only in the Minneapolis-St Paul area but also in the nation as part of the national transportation system. According to MAC statistics, Crystal is home base to over 290 aircraft and approximately 93,000 operations per year. While MAC's operations numbers are roughly half of the FAA's 2002 data, this level of based aircraft and operations make Crystal Airport a significant general aviation airport.

Well over 50 years ago, your predecessors with great wisdom and vision clearly recognized the need to establish a regional transportation system for aviation. Rather than simply placing the air carrier airport into the new agency – the Metropolitan Airport Commission (MAC), they created an airport system – a system of seven airports covering all points of the compass in the Twin-Cities.

As a system, these seven airports are symbiotic. Each relies on the other to provide certain services to not only pilots and aircraft owners but to the local community through economic development, employment and tourism. What occurs at one of these airports operationally, affects at least one of the others. The six reliever airports in the MAC system, of which Crystal is one, provide tremendous aviation traffic relief to your international airport. Without this relief, operational delays and costs to the airlines

would grow. Reliever airports provide an attractive alternative to conducting general aviation flight operations at the hub airport.

With airline flight delays on the increase nationwide, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has made airport capacity a high priority. Removing an airport like Crystal from a system is counter to the FAA's objectives and would reduce capacity in your area rather than increase it.

Recently, I received a message from one of our members who often comes to Minneapolis to conduct business. In part, his message read:

“When I come to Minneapolis on business, I fly into Crystal Airport. If Crystal Airport is closed, the next most convenient airport for me is MSP and that is the airport I would use.”

Just as you realize that when you hear from one of your constituents there are a large number of others who feel the same way, I can assure you that there are a large number of our members who feel the same was as the individual above. Bringing additional aircraft operations into MSP would be counter productive to reducing delays at MSP.

As another example, think of your local airport system in terms of being a highway on ramp or off ramp. What happens when a highway ramp is closed – even on a temporary basis? The result is backups, delays and congestion on other streets and highways. The same is true for airports.

Also consider the impact removing Crystal Airport from the system would have over the entire Twin-Cities area. Aircraft based there would have to relocate to another airport – increasing congestion. Operations that occur at Crystal would relocate as well. This would move airport noise to other communities. Then there is the airspace and airport approach procedures implemented by the FAA. These procedures were created based on

the current system of airports in the area. These too would likely change dramatically again shifting aircraft over flights into all airports in the area – including MSP.

Using MAC’s operational numbers for Crystal Airport, numbers we believe are understated; on average, over 246 flights per day would be diverted to other airports in the MAC system – including MSP. Increases at MSP could cost airlines millions of dollars in delays each year.

Over the past two years, MAC has accepted over \$500,000 in airport development funding from the FAA for runway improvements at Crystal Airport. These funds are provided with certain contractual obligations that require operation of the airport as an airport for 20 years. The contract is specific to Crystal and the grant obligations cannot be transferred to another airport in the MAC system. The FAA does not allow an airport sponsor to “buy their way out” of these obligations.

In closing, allow me to address the primary reason used by proponents in calling for the closure of Crystal Airport – financial subsidy of the airport by MAC. “Subsidy” may be the most misused term in public policy. Nearly every type of service provided by the public sector today could be classified as “subsidized” to one degree or another.

Does light rail “pay it’s own way” out of the fare box? What about the bus system? Interstate highway system? But, there is public good. These transportation systems provide a service judged to be important and in the best interest of providing transportation access to the public. The same is true for airports.

In our experiences nationally, other multi-airport systems such as the MAC system view their airports as a single system. Public agencies in Santa Clara, CA, Reno, NV, Phoenix, AZ and Houston, TX view all their airports as one integrated system; with one “pot” of money. Funds from the airports are pooled to allow operation and improvement of the others – to maintain that symbiotic relationship of providing services to the public while reducing delays at the airline hub airport. MAC is the only system we are aware of that

treats each of its airports individually. Even at that, we often point to the MAC airport system as one of the best-operated model systems in the United States.

Airlines often understand the important and vital role reliever airports play to a hub airport and the airline's efficient operations. Before US Airways fell on hard times, the airline actually paid airline revenue to support the reliever airport system in Philadelphia, PA. In the country's most congested airspace, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey uses funds from three of the nation's busiest airports – LGA, JFK & EWR – to help run its Teterboro general aviation reliever. These communities realized that having a good network of reliever airports in a high-density airport environment provided direct financial benefits to the region and the hub airlines.

Remember too that there are millions of dollars a year generated on the airport that are never realized by MAC but rather by the local city, county or state treasuries. Airport tenants pay personal property, real estate and sales taxes that are never seen by the airport. Rather, these fees are used to subsidize other, non-aviation related services.

There is more to value than dollars and cents. Crystal Airport adds value to Minneapolis-St. Paul. We urge you to consider the wisdom and vision of your predecessors and allow MAC to continue managing aviation demand in the manner they deem best for the public.

Some would point to Mayor Daley's closing of Meigs Field in Chicago last year as a government body having the ability to close a public airport. This simply is not true. The closing of Meigs was a very unique set of circumstances unduplicated at any other airport owned by a public sponsor. Furthermore, the US Congress has since taken steps to ensure this type of action does not reoccur. Even today, airports and airspace in the Chicago area continue to feel the impact that resulted from Meigs being removed from the city's aviation system.

This concludes my remarks. I will be pleased to answer any questions the Committee may have regarding our comments.

