



## AIRCRAFT OWNERS AND PILOTS ASSOCIATION

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January 6, 2005

Chairman Danny Bridges  
Harris County Commission  
P.O. Box 365  
Hamilton, GA 31811  
FAX: 706.628.4223

**Re: The Future of Pine Mountain Airport (PIM)**

Dear Chairman Bridges:

On behalf of the 403,000 Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) members – including nearly 12,000 in the State of Georgia – we strongly urge you to reject the Ida Cason Callaway Foundation's (the Foundation) proposal to close Pine Mountain Airport (PIM). By closing the airport you would not only be destroying a valuable community asset, you could also be creating numerous and significant legal and financial problems for Harris County in the future.

According to published reports, the presentation made to the Harris County Commission this week by representatives of the Ida Cason Callaway Foundation, in our view, contained inaccurate information and thoroughly misrepresented federally mandated airport closure requirements.

As reported by the Ledger-Enquirer on January 5, 2005, Callaway's proposal claims that it plans to "repay" the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) grants given to the County (the airport's sponsor) for aviation related improvements and upkeep in accordance with grant obligation guidelines. Please be aware that the FAA has *never* allowed any sponsor or entity to repay grant money with the sole intent of closing an airport. As noted in the FAA's letter to you dated December 20, 2004, the closure of the airport would be a "breach of ... agreements with the U.S. Government." When an airport sponsor requests funding, this money is earmarked for aviation related purposes, specifically for the sponsor to be able to continuously maintain the airport and operate it in a safe and serviceable condition. This is a binding contract with the Federal government.

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Preserving airports is so vital to our national transportation system that the U.S. Congress tightened restrictions on closing airports in its Vision 100 legislation, signed into law just over one year ago. Also, the U.S. government has classified PIM as an important part of the national aviation transportation system as detailed in the National Plan of Integrated Airport Systems (NPIAS), thereby designating it as a potential recipient of additional federal grants and further solidifying its significance to the national transportation system. Also, it is important to note that the Callaway Foundation severely underestimated and misrepresented (by a factor greater than seven hundred percent!) the number of annual operations at the airport. While the news story reports Callaway advised you “the airport handled 1,000 takeoffs and landings,” the FAA’s published documents indicate 7,500 annual operations at PIM.

With all respect, we urge you to carefully review all the potential ramifications of the Callaway proposal to close the airport. As the airport sponsor, Harris County is obligated, contractually with the Federal government, to operate the airport once funds have been accepted from the FAA. Federal grants to airports are not “loans” that can be repaid. When a sponsor accepts these taxpayer funds – generated by the users of airports like Pine Mountain -- the sponsor is also accepting the requisite obligations, which include keeping the airport open. Repaying the money is not an option because once funds are accepted the sponsor must fulfill its end of the obligation.

What makes the Callaway Foundation proposal to close PIM almost surrealistic is that dozens of other communities, particularly those reliant on tourism, are literally *competing* to attract an “on-site” airport. For the County to consider abandoning and destroying a 5,000-foot runway literally within a solid three wood distance from the front door of a world class golf resort defies all economic logic.

AOPA believes that Harris County and Callaway Gardens should view the airport as a cornerstone, rather than an obstacle, to its tourism and retirement community industries. As you may know, several golf communities have embraced the revenue potential of local airports and developed them with a focus on services that will attract long and short-term visitors in order to expand and diversify the local tax base. Moody Gardens in Galveston, Texas is a prime example, and dozens of other resorts and retirement communities in Florida and the Carolinas wish they had “on-site” access to an airport like PIM that can accommodate a wide range of aircraft. Consider just the existing marketing potential the airport represents in a county of some 25,000 residents: PIM lies right in the middle of more than 50,000 AOPA-member pilots in Georgia and two neighboring states. Many of those members play golf; most will retire at some point, but all of them want to fly their planes as close as possible to where they live, recreate, and visit to a convenient, on-site airport – one just like PIM.

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Thank you for your consideration and we again urge you to keep the airport open. We look forward to meeting with you in person at your earliest convenience to discuss this vital issue.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Cohen', with a stylized, flowing script.

Roger Cohen

Vice President of Regional Affairs

Aircraft Owners & Pilots Association

cc: Ed Ratigan, Georgia DOT  
Bob Minter, AOPA Southeast Regional Representative  
Scott L. Serritt, Manager, ATL FAA ADO