

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Testimony

Statement of Randall H. Walker, Director
Department of Aviation
Clark County, Nevada
House Resources Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands
H.R. 3705, to Transfer Certain Lands in Ivanpah Valley, Nevada
June 23, 1998

Mr. Chairman, my name is Randall Walker and I am the Director of Aviation for the Clark County Department of Aviation in Las Vegas, Nevada. I appear today to testify in strong support of H. R. 3705, which authorizes the Secretary of the Interior to convey for fair market value, certain lands in the Ivanpah valley to the Clark County Department of Aviation to allow us a site for the future construction of an airport to serve southern Nevada.

The role of the airport in any community is to provide the airport infrastructure and facilities necessary to enable any and all air carriers to serve the community if they choose to do so. Because Las Vegas has been one of the fastest growing airports in the nation, keeping pace with airline passenger demand has been a significant challenge. At McCarran International Airport, passenger traffic since 1990 has grown 64 %.

Las Vegas is fortunate. We have direct service to over 50 communities and unlike hub airports, we are not dependant upon any single carrier to maintain this level of air service. Our airport system consists of Las Vegas McCarran International Airport, the tenth largest airport in the United States, the North Las Vegas Airport, which is the 47th largest airport in the country, the Henderson Executive Airport, an important corporate reliever airport for McCarran, the Jean Airport, a sport aviation complex, and the Overton and Searchlight Airports, two general utility airports in rural parts of Clark County. The Department of Aviation operates, as I have mentioned several smaller airports in our airport system. The development of these smaller airports has allowed aircraft operations at our major airport, McCarran, to accommodate primarily large air carrier type traffic instead of having our limited airfield and airspace available become congested with smaller, slower, commuter and general aviation traffic. Providing first class small airport airport alternatives to McCarran for the smaller, slower aircraft has been crucial to our strategy of keeping delays low at McCarran.

Half the people who come to southern Nevada now come by air. Air traffic into Las Vegas has statistically followed the construction of hotel rooms. Before the year 2000, Las Vegas will add approximately 12,000 more rooms to the inventory. We estimate that every thousand new hotel rooms will generate 275,000 visitors or an annual total of 6 million new tourists, half of whom will pass through McCarran.

Seventy eight years ago when Randall Henderson landed his small airplane on a dirt runway, air service to Las Vegas was initiated. Fifty years ago in 1948, Clark County acquired McCarran field on south Las Vegas Boulevard. Once a small airfield out in the desert, McCarran is now surrounded by the Las Vegas Strip to the West, the University of Nevada Las Vegas to the north, extensive residential, industrial and commercial

development to the east and by U.S. Interstate 215 and the Union Pacific Railroad to the south. We cannot expand beyond our present acreage to accommodate the growth we anticipate in the years ahead.

We are proud of the facilities we have constructed at McCarran Airport and with the opening of the new "D" gates terminal last weekend, we will have constructed over \$1.5 billion of new facilities and infrastructure to not only accommodate, but to stay significantly ahead of this explosive growth. The new "D" gates will provide sufficient facilities to carry us *five* years into the future. The "D" gates terminal is located ,however, on *one of* the last spots of aircraft accessible land at McCarran. After the future phases of the "D" gates are complete, *we will not have realistic expansion alternatives* to add additional terminal facilities at the airport.

We now have four air carrier capable runways at McCarran, and due to space constraints, that is all we will ever have room for. Fortunately, with our existing four runways, there is sufficient airfield capacity to allow for additional short and mid term growth. However, once that growth gets above 600,000 annual aircraft operations, (we are currently at 474,000) our runway/taxiway system will produce cumulative delays that exceed an average of forty minutes per aircraft operation. These estimates have been prepared by the Federal Aviation Administration and are contained in the recent report, *Capacity Enhancement Plan for Las Vegas McCarran International Airport*, a copy of which I am submitting for the record. Simply put, we are running out of room at McCarran Airport.

I would like to briefly explain a little bit about the economics of airline service to Las Vegas. For a number of different reasons, Las Vegas is one of the least profitable destinations for the scheduled airlines to serve. This is due to the fact that most people who fly to Las Vegas plan ahead for a vacation or to attend a convention and buy their airplane ticket well in advance to secure the lowest fare possible. Other passengers come to Las Vegas as part of a comprehensive tour package where a tour broker has blocked space with an airline and at a hotel for a deep discount. Finally, many travelers redeem frequent flier miles to fly themselves or their families to Las Vegas at virtually no cost to them and thus no revenue for the airlines. With the majority of passengers traveling to Las Vegas being either advance purchase fares, tour packages or frequent flier redemptions, it is easy to see why Las Vegas is a low yield destination for the airlines.

It is easy to understand why the airlines which service Las Vegas, are very sensitive to the incremental system costs which results from departure and arrival delays. Increasing delays mean higher operational costs attributable to wasted fuel burned on the taxiways, added crew time and additional delays at connecting airports. As the operator of McCarran airport, we have to be sensitive that delay costs could make it difficult for airlines to add airline service or to maintain existing service levels.

For us to maintain the viability of long term airline service to Las Vegas, we need to find an alternative primary commercial service airport to McCarran. We have studied options for several years and we have concluded there is only one viable alternative airport site. Most of the airspace to the north of McCarran is under the control of the Department of Defense due to the ever increasing military operations at Nellis Air Force Base. This has limited our search to areas south of Las Vegas. The only viable site that has adequate airspace is about 22 miles south of McCarran in the Ivanpah Valley.

Ivanpah Valley is the only site that will allow for a full precision instrument approach that will not result in a severe airspace conflict with the air traffic at McCarran. This site, with the potential for a north-south complex of parallel runways is unusual because it is both flat and devoid of mountainous terrain off the ends of the future runways. It is also located in close proximity to Interstate 15 and the Union Pacific Railroad which will enhance intermodal transportation and cargo opportunities.

It is our plan to develop this airport as needed by our growth at McCarran. It is likely that the first developments to move to this new airport would be air cargo and charter operations with scheduled air service eventually following as traffic continues to increase at McCarran.

Notwithstanding the opportunity for us to obtain federal land under Section 505 of the Airport and Airways Improvement Act for free, there is a significant bureaucratic process involved that could take years to complete. Mr. Chairman, we are very anxious to secure this site and we are willing to pay fair market value for the land, which is just a little bit more than 6,000 acres. This new airport is absolutely critical for the Clark County Department of Aviation to fulfill its mission of never allowing the lack of airport infrastructure to be an impediment to people coming to visit Las Vegas, the Grand Canyon or other destinations in Color Country.

Mr. Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to discuss this most important issue regarding the future of our air transportation system in Clark County. I am available to answer any questions you may have.

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