

Airports are a definite advantage to pro-business cities

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Over the past few years, I have written from time to time about the ongoing saga of Santa Monica Municipal Airport and its battle to survive continuous attacks from an unlikely source – its own city.

It is not an uncommon battle. Many airports are finding themselves landlocked by dense development, and when the land supply runs out, airports are seen as easy pickings for city officials that believe in the *Kilo v. New London* version of eminent domain.

One in particular, Mayor Daley of Chicago, never let a little thing like property rights and the rule of law get in the way. When he wanted the land that Meigs Field, (Chicago's downtown airport) occupied, he sent bulldozers barreling through airport fencing at 2 a.m. in the morning on a mission to destroy the runway. Carving giant "Xs" through the runway paving, they rendered them useless and stranded dozens of aircraft that called Meigs home.

Daley got a slap on the hand when he should have gone to prison, but, hey, it's Chicago. Officials at Santa Monica aren't that bold, and at least they haven't attempted to close the airport in the same way, but after they have lost numerous legal battles, reports indicate that they have employed tactics intended to drive airport tenants away.

According to an AOPA (Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association) website report, the city began to issue eviction notices to some of its tenants in September of 2016. "The eviction notices, which, AOPA learned of from airport tenants shortly before news was made public by Southern California Public Radio on Sept. 15, are the latest in a rapid series of developments and legal maneuvers since the FAA ruled against the city on Aug. 15. The FAA reiterated its long-held position that the city is obligated to keep the promise it made in 2003 to operate the airport for at least 20 years after receiving the most recent installation of federal funding for airport improvements."

AOPA reported that "the mayor of Santa Monica, California, told the Los Angeles Times that the city remained "committed" to ousting both remaining fixed-base operators from the Santa Monica Municipal Airport, and was "disappointed but not surprised" that the FAA issued a cease-and-desist order blocking eviction of Atlantic Aviation and American Flyers."

AOPA also reported that the city had "also imposed restrictions on what types of fuel can be sold, limiting the options to biofuels for jets, and requiring lead-free fuel for all aircraft." Most aircraft engines are not designed to burn those kinds of fuel. In another report by AOPA, the city also attempted to take over all fuel sales at the airport by prohibiting any other fuel vendors. The FAA said that this was "a clear contravention of law."

AOPA attorney Ken Mead stated that “The FAA has taken a strong stand against the city council’s repeated and continuing actions to blatantly violate its obligations... It’s unconscionable the amount of time and taxpayer dollars the council has poured into this matter to simply please a vocal minority of Santa Monica residents.”

As I reported last week, the FAA and the City of Santa Monica recently reached an agreement to close the airport by the end of 2028, despite the FAA’s previous stance that the airport should stay open in perpetuity. The agreement allows the city to immediately shorten its runway from about 5,000 feet to just 3,500 feet, effectively prohibiting most all jet traffic from using the airport.

The agreement came as good news/bad news to both proponents and opponents of the airport closure. Proponents were disappointed that a date had been set for its closure and that a shortened runway would limit traffic, but relieved that there would be time to get the decision reversed. Opponents were glad to hear that the airport would be closed, but disappointed that the closure wasn’t immediate.

The biggest losers are the residents of Santa Monica. I am sure there are many cities that would love to have a pro-commerce asset like an airport, but because of development and unavailability of land are unable to have their own. To deliberately forfeit such an asset seems totally counterintuitive to what most cities want to do, attract business to their communities.

President Trump is promising to bring manufacturing and business back to America. If he is successful, aviation will grow rapidly because aviation is so vital to business. But even if he is not successful, a pro-business city with an airport will have the advantage over those that don’t, and that could be the edge those cities need to survive and thrive.



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