

## Testimony June 9 Assembly Transportation Committee

Good morning, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to address the committee in support of Assembly Bill 4092

My name is Peter Weidhorn and ten years ago I purchased Eagles Nest Airport and undertook the arduous, expensive and consuming development of Eagles Nest located in Eagleswood Township in southern Ocean County. Ten years ago, Eagles Nest consisted of a 3200 foot paved runway, was an eyesore and nuisance for the town, and if I had not purchased the airport, it would have joined the three nearby airports that had been recently closed:

Manahawkin now a shopping center,  
Smithville now a condominium community  
and Bader field in Atl. City which has been  
redeveloped as an ice rink and failed baseball stadium.

Ten years ago, Eagles Nest consisted of only a 3200 foot runway, and that was it. No electricity, no water no septic, no buildings. Just 65 acres of environmentally challenged debris and a runway.

Today, with my personal investment, there are hangars, a fuel storage and distribution facility, bathrooms, electricity and domestic water. And with the much-appreciated grants from the State and DOT, there are runway lights, a beacon, a PAPI light system that aids the pilot in making an approach to land and a taxiway to enhance safety. Without those grants and the support of NJDOT the airport would have closed. However, the rules changed in midstream. Grants that had previously been matched by an owner contribution of 5% went to a 10% owner contribution and soft costs such as initial engineering, legal, and permits became the responsibility of the owner. This was a dramatic change to my budget and affected the airport system safety and infrastructure integrity. Ten years ago, under legislation written by the Assembly and signed into law, Airports were also eligible to sell development rights to the State thereby guaranteeing the continued existence of this essential economic driver. But this safety net is not currently being pursued by the Department of Transportation.

Today there are 41 airports in NJ down from over 60, twenty years ago. Of the 41, 23 are privately owned but available without restriction for public use. However, the 23-face continued economic stress and pressure from developers willing to pay up and repurpose the land. My friends, you cannot let this happen. One airport, Flying W in Medford will close shortly and be redeveloped for housing. And, I know other owners that are considering similar fates.

The airport system is critical for the New Jersey's continued economic advancement, for the growth of its industrial/commercial sector and the development of the newest technologies available to flight.

Our children need the airport system to stimulate their dreams especially through STEM education opportunities. Flying is not just about being a pilot. It's about the education and training to be a successful and challenged individual, whether as a controller, engineer, electronic specialist, weather specialist, mechanic or designer of next generation of flight. It's encouraging to see that several NJ airports now have innovative drone businesses as tenants. Who knows which of our children could be the next Buzz Aldrin who grew up in Upper Montclair and was inspired by airplanes and airports and was the second person to step on the moon.

An example closer to home, is to take your child or grandchild to a nearby airport and see for yourselves how their eyes light up and their brains absorb the wonders that each airport embraces. "Reality" instead of an electronic screen may stimulate their interest to learn. And whether that interest resides in flight or aircraft is immaterial. What is important is that you may stimulate your child or grandchild to think about the wonderful options available to a curious mind.

The NJ Airport system is in critical need of significant infrastructure redevelopment and obstruction elimination to insure the continued economic growth that benefits the state through tax dollars, high value employment opportunities and industry that relies upon air transportation to move personnel and freight. The recent state aviation system plan funded by the FAA, states that 17 million dollars are required annually to maintain a safe system. The current NJDOT budget provides only 4 million dollars a year. Hardly enough to ensure safety, let alone maintain state of the art facilities. Each airport whether privately owned, county or community owned or under the direction of the Port Authority is part of the NJ Airport system, and shares in this small sum annually. Runways like highways wear out and it costs millions to resurface a runway. Private airport owners, county or townships don't have the funds to maintain safe infrastructure.

The Bill you are considering, provides that grants authorized by the Commissioner of the Department of Transportation will not expire but can be extended if local government or other Departments within the state hold up issuing the required permits. We all understand the political process of construction and permitting, this bill simply allows additional time for that process to proceed without forfeiture of the grant. Even though each of us use airports, and the merchandise, food and critical supplies and emergency services which are shipped through airports, airports are not generally a favored enterprise within a community, thus delays and time-consuming hearing are inevitable. This bill provides additional time. I encourage support for the Chairman's bill.

The bill is a critical element; however, it does not solve the crisis we face. Obstructions such as, tree growth, are limiting night operations, reduce the length of usable runway and compromise public safety. Utility companies can trim trees on private property in the name of public safety, but New Jersey airports and NJDOT cannot. In fact, the state environmental regulations conflict

with FAA safety regulations for clear approach paths to airports. Our hands are tied. The health of our airport system and the safety of the flying public is being jeopardized because of conflicting regulations, and permitting problems that can be easily rectified.

Moreover, the airport oversight component of NJDOT which was professionally staffed by up to 16 engineers and safety inspectors is now staffed by 4 dedicated employees but, who don't have the knowledge and experience of those before them. Safety is a continuing challenge but we must maintain and expand the economic benefits generated by the airport system. The most recent 2016 NJ Statewide Airport Economic Impact study which has been provided to you confirms the economic benefits, employment and tax revenue generated by each airport within the system. Without your commitment to maintain infrastructure, obstruction clearance and key staffing, the critical transportation system is in jeopardy.

I thank you for your time today. I applaud the NJDOT and its employees, who are dedicated to supporting the airport system which has over the years supported the economic growth, corporate expansion and critical needs of our Garden State.

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