



**Statement of Kevin M. Burke**  
**President and CEO, Airports Council International – North America**  
**Before the House Subcommittee on Transportation and Maritime Security**  
**“Climbing Again: Stakeholder Views on Resuming Air Travel in the COVID-19 Era”**  
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Thank you, Chairman Correa and Ranking Member Lesko, for inviting me to participate in today’s hearing. I am Kevin M. Burke, President and CEO of Airports Council International – North America (ACI-NA), the trade association representing the local, regional, and state governing bodies that own and operate airports in the United States and Canada. I would like to take this opportunity to share with you information about the current state of America’s airports and then outline some policy recommendations ACI-NA has developed to provide for the health of travelers, instill public confidence in air travel, enhance security, and set a solid foundation for the future of aviation.

**Airports Appreciate Emergency Assistance through the CARES Act**

As we continue to navigate these unprecedented times, U.S. airports are very grateful for the \$10 billion in emergency support Congress provided through the CARES Act, which was truly a lifeline for airports all across the country. I want to thank all of you in Congress for including airport funding in the CARES Act. The CARES Act grants are helping airports offset some of the financial damage from the abrupt, unexpected drop in air travel that resulted from necessary precautions to limit the spread of COVID-19. Even with the CARES Act grants, though, airports nationwide still face major financial and operational hurdles.

**America’s Airports Are Still Hurting**

During the COVID-19 national emergency, ACI-NA and its member airports remain committed to ensuring that our nation’s aviation system remains safe, secure, and efficient for all users. But as you have all likely seen in your travels to and from Washington, America’s airports are hurting.

Powerful economic engines before the COVID-19 pandemic, generating more than \$1.1 trillion in annual activity and supporting over 10 million jobs, U.S. airports have been reduced to mere shells of their former selves, with passenger traffic down nearly 90 percent from the levels we saw this time last year. As a result, airports, airlines, and tenants are all now struggling to survive. ACI-NA estimates U.S. airports face [at least \\$23 billion in operating losses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), based on preliminary data about air service reductions to date. On top of that, tenants at U.S. airports – such as airlines, concessionaires, and rental car companies – are all seeking financial relief from airports via rent/fee waivers and deferrals.

Meanwhile, airports must still keep the lights on, provide for the health, safety and security of employees and tenants, while ensuring the bills are paid. One big cost for airports is debt payments. Approximately \$7 billion in airport bond principal and interest payments are due each year, with total outstanding debt for U.S. commercial airports standing at roughly \$100 billion.

At the same time, U.S. airports face growing operating expenses as they increase cleaning of public areas, checkpoints and restrooms; add more hand sanitizing stations for passengers and employees; install plexiglass barriers in passenger-facing areas; procure cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment; and implement physical distancing measures.

As a result, airports are working hard now to cut their budgets, reduce other expenses, defer many capital projects, and plan for the new airport experience now and into the future.

### **Airports Working on Industry Initiatives to Enhance Safety and Recover from COVID-19**

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, airports have been intensely focused on providing for the health and safety of their passengers, employees, and tenants. Airports have enhanced communications to raise awareness about reducing the spread of COVID-19 by updating their public websites, installing signage, and making routine public announcements.

Airports have also implemented numerous mitigation measures to include the deployment of additional hand sanitizer and plexiglass barriers at various locations, like ticket counters, checkpoints, gates, and restrooms. In collaboration with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA), airports have worked to ensure “social distancing” space between screening checkpoint lanes. And airports have significantly increased the frequency of cleaning, with an intense focus on “touch points.”

ACI-NA, in coordination with other transportation sector representatives, advocated for the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) to encourage the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide face coverings to critical infrastructure workers. As a result, 3.757 million face coverings were allocated to the aviation sector and shipped by FEMA to the top 30 airports plus six, to ensure geographic coverage, availability at carrier hubs and cargo airports, for distribution to critical infrastructure workers in the aviation sector.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) subsequently advised ACI-NA that it was tasking the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) to contact all Part 139 airports with commercial service to request delivery addresses so FEMA could ship 87 million cloth face coverings to airports for distribution to passengers and critical infrastructure workers. ACI-NA worked closely with DOT and FAA to provide information and answer questions from airports about the shipment of cloth face coverings. Airports that have received the shipments are in the process of making the face coverings available to passengers.

The airport industry, through ACI-NA and its network of committees, is also working on industry initiatives to aid in the recovery from COVID-19. Our team is hard at work developing and disseminating the best ways to help minimize the spread of the virus, promote confidence in air travel, ensure consistency across the industry, and streamline the overall recovery of air travel. I have included as part of my testimony ACI-NA’s official policy positions on facial coverings and passenger health screenings related to COVID-19.

We continue to coordinate closely with the FAA, TSA, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and others on recovery efforts, regulatory guidance, and flexibility on regulatory requirements that is critical in helping airports remain operational while ensuring safety and security of the traveling public. Of particular importance is our coordination to ensure the consistency of messaging, which is critical to instill passenger confidence. I want to commend the agency leaders for partnering with ACI-NA and our member airports on these important initiatives as we collectively strive to recover from COVID-19.

### **Airports Offer Additional Policy Solutions**

There is increasing concern, however, that the drastic budgetary actions airports are taking, coupled with the initial infusion of emergency funds from the CARES Act, will not be enough to keep pace with the sharp revenue declines, putting many airports at risk. Most importantly, airports want to do what they can to help all of their employees in this time of extreme economic stress. In addition to the important work the airport industry is doing, I would like to offer the following federal policy solutions that will greatly assist airports and aviation as we head towards recovery.

First, with passenger traffic and airport revenues down significantly, U.S. airports need another infusion of federal funds to assist them in this time of national emergency. We recommend \$13 billion in additional emergency assistance to be distributed as quickly and efficiently as possible to commercial service airports through existing entitlement formulas with no reduced apportionments. These funds would help airports meet the operating costs and debt-service obligations detailed above in the coming year.

Second, U.S. airports are working with stakeholders in their facilities – including federal agencies, airlines, and tenants – to develop and implement new measures to protect public health and promote public confidence in air travel. A major facet of those plans is developing “touchless” aviation security screening processes that provide, enhanced security, lower false alarms, and adequate physical distancing for passengers and baggage moving through TSA checkpoints and CBP ports-of-entry. In order to further enhance security and provide for the health of the traveling public, we recommend immediate funding for new technology, infrastructure, and programming updates throughout the aviation system, including the following security upgrades at U.S. airports:

- **Congress should provide funding for TSA to procure and deploy technology at security checkpoints that reduces touch points, maintains physical distancing, and increases security effectiveness.** Technology such as enhanced Advanced Imaging Technology, Credential Authentication Technology with opt-in Biometric Authentication Technology, and Computed Tomography integrated with Automated Screening Lanes will increase efficiency and security effectiveness while minimizing document exchanges and false alarms that necessitate pat down and bag inspections.
- **Congress should ensure there is a sufficient number of Transportation Security Officers (TSOs) so that screening checkpoints remain open, operational, and safe.** In addition to maintaining an efficient flow of passengers through the checkpoint while properly physical distancing, airports remain concerned about the vulnerability associated with large groups of passengers waiting in checkpoint lines, as well as the potential for misconnecting checked

baggage and passengers who miss their intended flights. A shortage of TSOs at a time when airports, and the industry, are attempting to recover from COVID-19 would be disastrous, negatively impacting security and airport operations.

- **The TSA Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) Reimbursement Program is essential in helping to ensure law enforcement coverage at security checkpoints and public areas.** Through the TSA Modernization Act, Congress clearly recognized the significant security value the TSA LEO Reimbursement Program and required TSA to expand it. Section 1935 of the Act directs the TSA Administrator to increase the number of awards under the LEO Reimbursement Program “to increase the presence of law enforcement officers in the public areas of airports, including baggage claim, ticket counters, and nearby roads,” not just at security checkpoints. Since TSA has taken a more restrictive approach to approving applications and limited reimbursement to only those law enforcement officers stationed in the immediate vicinity of security checkpoints, the expansion of the program envisioned by Congress to increase the presence of law enforcement officers in other critical airport areas has not occurred.

TSA created the LEO Reimbursement Program to partially reimburse airports for providing law enforcement officer staffing at screening checkpoints, as required in federal law, because the agency did not have the funding to do so. Over time many airports have entered into reimbursable agreements with TSA to provide law enforcement officers to support TSA screening operations. As security threats in the public areas of airports continue to evolve – and TSA imposes additional requirements on airport law enforcement officers – it is essential for Congress to provide TSA adequate funding for the LEO Reimbursement Program.

- **In accordance with an Aviation Security Advisory Committee recommendation, Congress should establish an airport security-focused grant program at TSA to support checkpoint redesigns, pandemic planning, new airport emergency operations centers, the deployment of perimeter security, access control, automated screening lanes, enhanced closed-circuit TV and other security technology at airports.** Airport operators have limited funding available that must be prioritized across a multitude of safety, security, and operational projects. While DHS’s existing grant programs have dispensed billions of dollars for systems and technology to bolster state, tribal, and local security, very little has been allocated to airports.
- **Congress should provide funding for cleaning and sanitization services at checkpoints and other areas that helps airports provide for the health and safety of TSOs, passengers, and aviation workers.** This year’s final appropriations measure included an administration request to eliminate a TSA program that reimbursed airports for janitorial services at security checkpoints, effectively shifting the full burden to airports. Despite the administration’s assertions to the contrary, there is no federal requirement that airports provide janitorial services at TSA checkpoints. Airport operators should not be forced to assume the costs of janitorial services at tenant locations outside of their control, particularly when they are required by law to provide the space to TSA free of charge. Now that TSA has established a program to reimburse airports for cleaning and sanitization, airports are better positioned to support increased cleaning requirements in response to the COVID-19 national emergency. Congress should fully authorize and appropriately fund this program.

- **Congress should ensure TSA has the funds necessary to purchase new Explosive Detection Systems (EDS) to replace outdated systems, and to continue to fulfill its obligation to reimburse eligible airports for the installation of past EDS.** As many EDS have or are rapidly reaching the end of their useful lives, TSA needs funding to purchase replacement systems. Absent necessary funding, TSA will incur increasing costs to operate and maintain old systems that routinely break down and adversely impact security and airport operations.

We appreciate Congress providing funding in the past two fiscal years for TSA to reimburse airports for previously incurred costs associated with the construction and deployment of in-line checked baggage screening systems. Since these airports diverted significant amounts of money from other important aviation security projects in order to purchase and install EDS, we encourage Congress to continue to follow through on this commitment with additional funding, and prohibit TSA from redirecting any unused EDS funds to other TSA programs until all eligible airports receive full reimbursement.

Third, we recommend putting additional resources towards retaining and hiring additional CBP officers at the ports-of-entry and fully implementing the biometric entry-exit program. CBP user fees have decreased tremendously during this pandemic, which has put a huge hole in the agency's budget for this year and next. ACI-NA remains at the forefront of a diverse coalition of industry stakeholders who support improving travel and trade facilitation through CBP ports-of-entry. The coalition – which includes leading voices from various shipping, tourism, travel, trade, law enforcement, and employee groups – sent letters to the Appropriations Committees last month in support of supplemental funding for CBP to make up for the multi-billion loss of user-fee revenue.

Fourth, along those lines, we recommend finally ending the diversion of user fees designed to enhance security. Each year billions of dollars in TSA and CBP user fees are needlessly diverted from their intended purpose to subsidize other federal programs. In this time of national emergency, it is critical to stop these budgetary gimmicks, end the fee diversion and ensure the revenue is restored to its proper use of funding and enhancing crucial transportation security programs.

Fifth, we recommend establishing a joint advisory panel involving the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and the U.S. Department of State – along with industry stakeholders – to develop recommendations about the operational and infrastructure issues related to pandemic planning. Most notably, funding for infrastructure and technology will be urgently needed to ensure airports can continue to make necessary upgrades and adjustments to their facilities.

Finally, we recommend extending the deadline for full implementation of REAL ID to a future date that allows for significant nationwide penetration of REAL ID compliance in order to minimize unnecessary impacts on air travelers and operations during what is expected to be a prolonged economic recovery. Earlier this year, before state DMVs shut down due to COVID-19, DHS data indicated that states had issued little more than 95 million REAL ID-compliant driver's licenses and identification cards, and more than two-thirds of driver's licenses and identification cards held by Americans were not REAL ID compliant. Although DHS streamlined the process by allowing states to accept the required documents submitted electronically, applicants must still come in person to a DMV location with the required documentation for the purpose of obtaining a REAL ID. Given the likelihood that DMVs – when they do reopen – will be faced with a backlog of other service requests,

REAL ID applications may be delayed even further. The health of the aviation industry must be considered when establishing a deadline for REAL ID implementation, and a rush to implementation must not depress air travel during a recovery period that is expected to be slow and prolonged.

## **Conclusion**

Airports are leading economic engines in their community and investments in airports have multiplying impacts throughout their regions. I hope we can all work together over the next few months to help airports weather this crisis so we can get Americans back to work and traveling again through an aviation system that is stronger, safer, more secure, and more resilient than ever.

Thank you for this opportunity today. I welcome your questions.