

Date: Thursday, March 31, 2022

From: Meaghan Emery, South Burlington City Council Vice-Chair

To: Vermont Senate Committee on Transportation, Senator Dick Mazza presiding

Re: Testimony for H.52 on Burlington International Airport Governance

Dear Senators:

I testify before you today as a member of the South Burlington City Council, invited by Senator Chittenden to share with you some of what I have learned over the past five months about what I would characterize as a crisis of confidence in Airport management at BTV.

I have served on the City Council for twelve years, have contacts and friends who work at the Airport, and have lived in Chamberlin neighborhood or what is called the “Airport neighborhood” for twenty years. So, I can also draw on my deep experience as I make my remarks to you today.

Earlier in March, I was approached by a member of the General Aviation community, that is the private aviation community at BTV. Doug Smith is a resident of South Burlington, a retired commercial pilot for Delta Airlines, and the founder of the Vermont Flight Academy (VFA). He is also a friend. As a constituent of mine, he reached out to one of his City Councilors to invite me on a tour of the Flight Academy/Vermont Tech, the Burlington Tech Center (BTC), and Aerodyme. We spent three-and-a-half hours together speaking with many of our state’s top aviation leaders and educators, and I learned how integral these educational and service centers are to the Airport. VFA/Vermont Tech and BTC offer accredited programs that lead to a terminal high school degree, Associate’s degree, all the way up to a Bachelor of Science degree. The roughly 60 students enrolled at VFA can earn any of nearly ten different pilot’s licenses in 2/3 the time compared to other flight schools nationwide – 1,000 flight hours compared to 1,500 flight hours. VFA is distinctive because it is a Part 141-FAA accredited academy, and 100% of the graduates, including men and women, find positions as commercial pilots or mechanics.

Over the past weeks, I also met with team members at BETA, the CEO of Heritage Aviation, and a manager at Pratt & Whitney. Because of the conditions of our airfield, including our seasons and the Green Mountains, and the fact that this is an international airport with a control tower, the flight training schools at our airport are ideally placed for producing pilots. Because the Burlington area, the lake, and surrounding mountain resorts are a draw for tourists, the businesses that support Airport operations are strategically placed to make us even more attractive to owners of private aircraft. This campus located in the General Aviation area of the Airport, what is called the Valley, is, without a doubt, given the high demand for pilots and mechanics, one of the most important tech employment centers in the state and it sets Vermont apart.

VFA is now partnering with BETA Technologies to expand their pilot training program and support the development of green aviation in a general aviation center; and I have no doubt that this partnership here at our international airport will be long lasting and a boon to the State of Vermont for decades to come. We have a world-class operation that is blossoming right before our eyes here in South Burlington, Vermont.

And yet, going back to that initial outreach a few weeks ago, I am here to tell you that not everyone in this community is thriving like they should be. BTC and Aerodyme are housed in rusting, decrepit hangars. There are not enough hangars for aircraft used by the academy and tech center, and their exposure to snow and ice weathers aircraft, shortening their lives. There is competition for what is perceived to be not-enough land for expansion and lack of trust between all members of the General Aviation community. Having spoken with more than a dozen people in the GA Valley, here are some of the pressing needs that indicate to me a clear need for an independent study on Airport governance:

- Burlington Technical Center just received a \$10 million grant to build a new school, combining both the high school and VTC (Vermont Technical College) associate degree programs, and they do not have a clear idea of where they can site a new building. I can see from the maps of Airport land where they can go, but it will take coordination with other tenants, and this coordination is lacking.

- There is a desperate need for hangar space for aircraft, and the four rusting though solid post-WWII/Cold War-era hangars need to be refurbished. This is not a new problem. This has been the case for years and has not been dealt with.

- There is a wariness between tenants, exacerbated by a lack of trust in the Airport governance structure. Many members of the GA community expressed to me their frustration over the composition of the advisory Airport Commission, which they believe should not be composed solely of friends of the mayor's but rather some people who know something about aviation, including pilots and mechanics. The biggest take-away from my meetings – it was not unanimous, but it was by far representative of the majority – is that the policymaking and planning processes at the Airport are not transparent, lack vision, and do not include the Airport community members in a coherent communication structure. Just one illustrative example, some are called regularly into meetings with the Airport Director, and others do not know that meetings are being held.

Burlington's management of the Airport had resurfaced as a topic of concern this past December, when a petition was submitted by members of the General Aviation community at the Airport to the Burlington City Council, demanding that their needs be considered in planning processes. I've named a few of their concerns, and here are a few more: there needs to be rational, coordinated discussion of (1) which tenants need to have access to the runway, (2) which require access to one of the two aprons in the Valley used for engine-run-ups, (3) where businesses can expand, and (4) where parking, commercial buildings, and other amenities should go. I do not believe that past Airport studies commissioned by Burlington have been comprehensive enough nor inclusive of all the stakeholders that make BTV the most important economic engine of the state.

This is a precious asset, that is an an Enterprise Fund of the City of Burlington? And another point that contradicts Mayor Weinberger's assertion that Burlington taxpayers have alone invested in BTV. This enterprise fund (like our Water or Wastewater Funds) are self-contained with expenses paid from the fees raised (i.e., not property tax.) The [FY22 Burlington](#)

[International Airport Enterprise Fund budget](#) shows the revenues are grants, fees, investments, charges for service, use of fund balance, etc. The only interfund transfers are on the expense side and show revenues from the airport going out to the City of Burlington. And if there is required debt service, why should the Burlington taxpayers alone be on the hook for backing debt that clearly benefits users from across the State and region? A regional governance model would require another form of debt security. These questions require study, independent study, and I call on your committee to take this bill to the full Senate and argue its merits. We have a world-class airport that needs a world-class management structure. It is truly in your hands.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely yours,
Meaghan Emery