

Dear Ray, Jonathan, and Josie,

This letter is not for publication but to request that you print a correction of an important error in your page-one article 2 March 2024, “FAA will not continue funding airport runway repairs.” Please forgive the length needed to explain the background.

The article incorrectly states: “The FAA has insisted multiple times—once in front of the Pitkin County commissioners and the Airport Advisory Board (AAB)—that the airport must widen its separation to allow aircraft with wingspans up to 118 feet, not just 95 feet, to use the airport, as dictated by the airport’s FAA design group standards.”

There is no such mandate; it is a myth long promoted by County Staff and now widespread in the community. Neither the link nor the videotape of the 11 April 2023 discussion between the FAA’s John Bauer and the BOCC and AAB supports the stated “must” interpretation, which omits (as do all County materials) the crucial punchline “...if the County continues to want the airport to accept bigger planes.” Mr. Bauer makes very clear that the request for bigger planes came originally from the County.

Around 2013–2014, the County believed it would need bigger planes to keep commercial air service because the CRJ-700s were supposedly about to retire, and there was no Aspen-operable regional jet to replace it. Both of these assumptions proved false, but the County’s 2014 policy continues as if nothing had changed and as if the commercial airlines were asking for bigger planes. (They are not; instead, that push seems to be coming covertly from owners of private jets too big to land in Aspen.)

The FAA then explained and explored what requirements would need to be met *if*, at the County’s request, the airfield were to be redesigned for bigger planes. Increasing the runway/taxiway centerline separation from 320 to 400 feet is among those requirements, but they remain contingent on the County’s request. The County could withdraw both the in-force 2016 and the proposed 2024 Airport Layout Plans, and substitute a new one that moves neither the runway nor the taxiway, but sustains both where they are, at vastly lower cost. This November, a vote of the people, or a change in the BOCC’s composition, could plausibly require this. Aspen Fly Right’s Essay #15 (https://aspensflyright.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Essay15_Forecast_dr12.pdf), summarized and augmented in a 27 June 2023 brief to the BOCC (<https://aspensflyright.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/BOCCForecastRoundtable27June2023u.pdf>) shows that such a maintain-the-status-quo airfield layout is consistent with historic ASE enplanement data, while the higher forecast sent to the FAA (but not actually approved by the BOCC) does not. (By its rules, FAA decisions must be rational and evidence-based.) Of course, deficient and obsolete landside infrastructure should meanwhile be vigorously improved.

In that BOCC/AAB hearing last 11 April, I twice asked Mr. Bauer—since no one else had—whether, if the County stopped asking for bigger planes, it could keep its 95-foot wingspan limit and its airfield-layout Modification of Standard (both of which had been formulated with FAA guidance and approval). He answered “Yes” and “Absolutely”, subject to his then withholding discretionary grants. Those answers can be viewed at <https://pitkincounty.ompnetwork.org/embed/sessions/266309/04-11-2023-bocc-work-session-special-meeting-04-11-2023>, also posted at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2Sp9S8RRIM>, at 2:19:36–2:21:55 (answer at 2:21:37–2:21:53) and at 2:42:50–2:43:45. The County’s own digest of Mr. Bauer’s 11 April 2023 remarks, distributed to the AAB on 20 April 2023, agrees: it asks, “Could ASE maintain the existing 320-foot runway/taxiway separation (34:36)?” and Mr. Bauer answers, “Yes, you can. But again, we then go into kind of an entitlement [grants] only situation”.

That the airport could not function without FAA discretionary grants is a County assertion, not a fact. It is strongly rebutted by a financial analysis to be published shortly by Aspen Fly Right, showing how FBO revenues could replace FAA discretionary grants and finance the modern infrastructure our airport needs, making the airport better but not bigger. A brief summary is in Essay 14, pp. 5–6.

This common County misinterpretation of what the FAA does or doesn't mandate our airport to do is the first fact-check in Aspen Fly Right's Essay #14, "Fact-checking Airport claims: over half are false," published last May at https://aspenflyright.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Essay14_Fact-checking-claims_rev15Dec2023.pdf. I urge your capable reporters and editors to become familiar with that document, so they do not repeat untruths being systematically propagated by the County's campaign. Two complementary later documented fact-checks are at <https://aspenflyright.org/1223opeddoc.pdf> and <https://aspenflyright.org/tvopeddocs.pdf>.

Let me respectfully suggest that a suitably terse and accurate correction could read:

CORRECTION. On March 2, our front-page story "FAA will not continue funding airport runway repairs" stated that "The FAA has insisted multiple times...that the airport must widen its [runway/taxiway] separation to allow aircraft with wingspans up to 118 feet, not just 95 feet...." The FAA has not stated such a mandate but has said that the airport could retain its current layout and 95-foot wingspan limit if Pitkin County no longer asked for the airport to accommodate bigger aircraft, although that choice would risk losing FAA discretionary grants. Whether other airport revenues, notably from the FBO, could replace such lost grants and continue funding needed airport infrastructure is disputed.

I'd be glad to discuss any needed details, and am available at most times this week at [snip]. Thank you. And Ray, I'd welcome an opportunity to sit down with you and get better acquainted.

With best wishes—Amory

Amory B. Lovins, President
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