

# THE AIRLINES’ PLANES AREN’T VANISHING



Photo by Pete McBride

Every day hundreds of planes take off or land at the Aspen Airport, 99% in opposite directions. ASE is known as one of the most dangerous airports in the country.

Pitkin County plans a half-billion-dollar redesign of Aspen Airport, starting with urgent and widely accepted improvements to safety, tower, terminal, and road traffic. The other and controversial part is redesigning the “airside” (where aircraft operate and park) to allow bigger, heavier planes that will supposedly be needed for several reasons. Those reasons all look unsound. Let’s start with the first one.

## The myth of the retiring CRJ700 fleet

The originally claimed need for airside redesign rests on a decade-old assumption that United’s, American’s, and Delta’s current planes—the CRJ700 regional jets owned, maintained, and crewed by SkyWest—will retire in the next 2–7 years. Their loss would require next-generation replacements too big for Aspen’s current size restrictions. But rebuilding for bigger planes poses a dilemma.

One kind of new plane, perhaps more, may indeed be somewhat cleaner and quieter, but then current FAA airport operating rules would also unavoidably admit *other* airline and private planes that are dirtier and noisier than today’s. Indeed, a noisier jetliner with less summer capacity (increasing flights and emissions) is now officially proposed to fit Delta’s unique circumstances. Such shifts’ net effects on our community are unforeseeable and uncontrollable. But happily, this whole dilemma is unnecessary.

ASE Vision’s and the County’s foundational CRJ700 retirement assumption, still vigorously asserted by expansion advocates and believed by many citizens, evaporates on closer scrutiny. Advocates’ original decade-old forecast is proving wrong by two or three decades: the CRJ700 fleet is probably less than halfway through its practical operating life. It was forecast to be 50% retired by 2021 and 100% by 2025, but SkyWest through 2022 actually retired zero CRJ700s. These CRJ700s remain in brisk market demand, are highly suited to Aspen’s unusual needs, and can reliably sustain its very lucrative commercial service as long as needed.

## CRJ700 “not going away”

The County’s longtime aviation marketing advisor contends the CRJ700s are going away even sooner than expected. Yet the County’s top aviation technical consultant said in October that “the CRJ700 is going to be flying for the next 20 or 30 years—that it’s not going away.” (Until today, that remark was unknown to the public.) Their differences need to come out from behind closed doors so citizens can publicly examine the objective evidence documented in our essay linked below. The County’s planned \$170-million-plus-inflation bet on who’s right, risking airport users’ and federal taxpayers’ money, should be based on facts, not rhetoric.

Aviation operators don’t retire older planes based on calendar ages or rules of thumb. They meticulously analyze specific planes in specific markets, choose the best, and safely fly older planes as long as they need to and can make a profit. Airplanes’ rated lifetimes are often officially extended, even repeatedly. The CRJ700 is especially tough and reliable, so it’s a strong candidate for safe life extension—and, many analysts agree, for resumed production now being seriously considered, probably with upgraded engines.

## Two solid insurance policies

If CRJ700s’ life were unexpectedly shortened, though, two modern alternatives provide an “insurance policy” to ensure uninterrupted, ample, and convenient airline service: (1) the CRJ700s’ CRJ900 successor, replacing on other United routes up to 38 of the Embraer 175s that Delta just chose for Aspen, and (2) the quiet Dash 8-Q400 turboprop that provided excellent, comfortable, higher-capacity, and competitive service to Aspen during 2008–2016, and has electric and hydrogen variants in development. The CRJ900 was artificially excluded from County studies by an analytic error now acknowledged. The Q400 was excluded as not being a jet (though it’s quieter on two of three metrics) or as phasing out of main airlines’ US fleets. Yet it remains highly used and valued in the other 95% of the world market, with 1,160 units globally available (including 175+ flying in Canada), and it could readily return to Aspen if needed.

## Patience

Rebuilding the airside for bigger planes because the existing ones are about to retire would be a nine-figure bet on a fallacy. In the coming weeks, we’ll explore why the other reasons often given for needing bigger airplanes in Aspen look equally unconvincing.

Aviation is undergoing profound change. It’s awash in pervasive uncertainties. Old assumptions are likely to be radically transformed before a new airside could even be built. With a decade of scary myths about imminent loss of Aspen’s commercial air service now debunked, let’s fix the rest of the Airport—safety, tower, terminal, and traffic. By then, patient observation will confirm that bigger planes really aren’t needed.

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for a safer, cleaner, quieter,  
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