TAKING BACK PUBLIC CONTROL OF ASPEN AIRPORT'S PRIVATE-PLANE TERMINAL

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.

Within weeks, a seemingly routine Pitkin County decision could steer a billion-plus dollars into—or out of—our community's economy. It could create or foreclose so many and lasting economic and environmental options that it may be the most consequential choice in County history.

Aspen's Airport is the third-busiest in Colorado, bringing at least two-thirds of visitors. Its flights are about 17% commercial airlines, 83% private planes. Their General Aviation terminal, the Fixed Base Operation or FBO, runs on a 30-year County contract expiring in six months. The incumbent operator and six competitors just bid to rebuild, own, and run it. Using mainly financial criteria, the Selection Committee just reinforced FBOs' rapid consolidation by shortlisting the first, second, and fourth biggest bidders. (If asked, users may have chosen differently.)

The expiring 1993 contract grants an unregulated private monopoly; County oversight powers molder unused. The operator charges high fuel prices at Aspen and its other FBOs nearby. Our eye-opening analysis (Essay 3, 29 December 2023) found the Aspen FBO's kerosene jet fuel selling for over twice the gasoline price at Roxy's Conoco across Highway 82. (Roxy's has competitors; the FBO doesn't.) The FBO's monopoly is so lucrative that its fuel profits could be twice the Airport's total budget. A new contract might yield a billion-dollar profit over 30 years—then renew semiautomatically and apparently indefinitely unless the operator is in default.

For the first time in 14+ years, the County's share of FBO fuel share revenues just rose—from about 1.3% to 1.5%. The next contract would charge far more. But is a bigger share of $9.18 a gallon (the latest price) fair? Should a critical public asset be run as a private monopoly?

Private equity firms own all three shortlisted bidders; last year, the world's biggest private equity firm paid $4.5 billion for the current FBO operator's parent company. But should our Airport enrich private shareholders, or serve the public at fair and reasonable prices? The Commissioners must choose which—and craft a matching structure—before picking an operator. The moment of truth is now. Happily, there's a clear path to success.

The County wisely reserved the right to reject all bids, lease no land, rebuild the aging FBO itself, and run it with new County staff or hire an experienced operator. (Some just-rejected bidders would relish and probably excel in that role, which their evaluation wasn't structured to consider.) Many publicly owned US airports, including former monopolies from Fort Wayne to Leadville to Jackson Hole, successfully use both these models. Nine percent even have multiple competing FBOs, something once discussed here and even promised but quietly dropped.

Choosing public control, not perpetuating private monopoly, offers major advantages with no material disadvantages (liability is a red herring):

- Safety training and rules could more effectively correct the root cause of 124 historic Aspen-area flying accidents causing 120 deaths—all in General Aviation. The industry and FAA could better help improve pilot training and familiarity if the County directly steered our Airport's rules, fees, and practices without a middleman focused chiefly on fuel profits.
- The County might gain new policy levers to share scarce airspace fairly between private planes and airlines—a rising risk to Aspen's reputation.
- Unconflicted interests and a focus on the public good could speed clean, quiet electric flight and regional airport collaboration.
- Cleaner, low-carbon Sustainable Aviation Fuel could be priced to displace fossil fuel.
- From fuel pricing to airplane parking and maintenance, disgruntled local pilots could feel fairly treated.
- Major aviation operators now wastefully "tankering" fuel from lower-priced FBOs could save cost and carbon.
- Missing data—from pricing to passenger arrivals—would become transparent, performance accountable, and user satisfaction measured.
- Not needing to finance FBO construction could reopen competition to smaller operators more embedded and invested in our community.
- Public-sector financing is cheaper than private—and could have ample capacity if proposed airside changes proved premature or needless.
- FBO operate-only contracts typically last 3–5 years, not 30—honing accountability, boosting agility, and reducing risk as aviation transforms.
- Profits could stay and multiply in town.

Most importantly, our Commissioners can't cleanly choose whether and how to admit bigger, heavier planes if a vast national chain hosts and guides five-sixths of our flight operations. The monopolist's opacity and profit focus turn our creative policymakers into mere bystanders.

Returning that fundamental authority to our elected officials is the start of new solutions. It reunites responsibility with agency. It unlocks many Airport puzzles. It creates valuable new options for the whole community. It opens doors that continued monopoly would slam shut.

Will a more visionary, adaptive, neighborhood-friendly, and sustainable Airport slip from our grasp for another 30+ years? Or will our County Commissioners open an exciting new path to a safer, quieter, cleaner, better Airport for all? **Please take a moment to tell them what you want: Pitkin County Board of County Commissioners, 530 E. Main Street, Suite 302, Aspen, CO 81611 or https://records.pitkincounty.com/Forms/Public-Comment, kindly copying the newspapers.**

Aspen Fly Right

← **Please review our extensive essays and research on airport issues for more in-depth analysis.**

aspenflyright.org | info@aspenflyright.org

PO Box 10097, Aspen CO 81612

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Exploring new solutions for a safer, cleaner, quieter, and better Aspen Airport.