

Agreeing About the Unimportant: Response to Greg Goldfarb (*Aspen Times*, 16 Aug 2024)

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Cirque du Soleil acrobats could take lessons from Greg Goldfarb (Aug. 16). With incredible dexterity, he extends the scaffolding needed to support his ever-elongating [nose](#) (*Aspen Daily News*, May 19) while simultaneously extinguishing his flaming pants.

He's right about one thing: there are important areas of agreement, mainly about basic community goals and values and the need for a thriving, modern airport. The three citizen groups critical of airport expansion and the two new groups supporting it agree on virtually everything our airport needs—*except* bigger planes and the new airfield layout to fit them. But the agreement “On almost everything” that Goldfarb claims isn't real, because he's misstating positions and who holds them.

Confusing the County with the Coalition

The views Goldfarb mis-ascribes to Pitkin County are instead those touted since July 29 by a new Coalition of private citizens who happen to have the same names and faces as our County Commissioners, three Valley Mayors (excluding Aspen's), and other noted local leaders and advisors. By doffing their hats, elected officials could thus continue their influence campaign while evading the Colorado Fair Campaign Practices Act's prohibition on using public funds to sway voters. (Move along, ignore that fishy smell, nothing to see here.) This end-run naturally confuses the public—apparently including Goldfarb, a charter Coalition member—and at least two Commissioners, who in their Aug. 12 meeting seemed to mix their official and private roles interchangeably.

Unfortunately for Goldfarb's thesis, the privately funded Coalition's views contradict the official views of Pitkin County, enshrined in its May 31, 2023 [forecast](#) that the Commissioners sent to the FAA, which approved it as the basis for the pending Airport Layout Plan. The County's forecast envisages that during 2022–42, our airport will add 3,495 “operations” (landings or takeoffs) by Airbus A-220s—80% of them in 2042 by the doubled-capacity, 130–150⁺-seat A220-300 model. This less-agile aircraft isn't approved to fly into Aspen, and the County's lead forecaster personally thinks it never will, but the FAA wants our airfield redesigned around it, including the wider runway required by its more-than-doubled weight. The Coalition never mentions it—only its smaller A220-100 cousin. Neither plane fits our airfield, so the forecast assumes a rebuild would remove this restriction in 2032.

Ignoring nearly all the commercial planes

In 2042, the airlines would then bring 91,673 or 31% more passengers to Aspen. Contrary to claims that bigger planes mean fewer flights, airline flights would also rise by 8% over 2022's as more passengers, especially on new East Coast routes, needed even more of the bigger new planes. But Goldfarb barely mentions the *non*-commercial planes that are 83%

of our airport's traffic. That omission (see box) vastly understates the crowding, quality-of-life, and environmental risks of untrammelled access by bigger private planes—the unavoidable potential result of the proposed expansion.

Details for nerds

During 2022–42, ASE operations are [forecasted](#) to rise by 57% more for business jets than for airlines, adding 9,572 operations (takeoffs or landings). That 33% rise would include 7,604 more operations by private “air taxis”—charters and on-demand flights—*making them twice as numerous in 2042 as airline planes*. “Air taxis” have up to 60 seats but carry an unforecasted number of passengers. As an upper bound, if those air taxis each had 60 filled seats (vs. 66 forecast for airline planes), they could bring 228,120 additional annual passengers in 2042, or *2.5 times the additions from all airline growth*. Charters could easily swamp the already-scary airline growth. Yet Goldfarb ignores all air-taxi passengers.

Moreover, 13% of the forecasted 2042 business-jet operations are of unstated types, to avoid forecasting which and how many of the many hundreds of old, dirtier, noisier private jets like 737s and A319/320s—ideal for charters—could qualify to fly into an expanded Aspen airport. (The County in 2020 [identified](#) 928 registered General Aviation aircraft with wingspans over 95'. We expect many could want to fly to ASE.) Goldfarb's “1%” calculation omits any growth in those unspecified business jets, which are tenfold more numerous than the four specifically identified types he does count. Figures can't lie, but liars figure.

Forecasts and policies

To be sure, the County's forecast is [bogus](#), dictated by the FAA (on pain of losing grants to fulfill it) in apparent violation of its published procedures, and using methods so deeply flawed that as a term paper in my Civil and Environmental Engineering Department at Stanford, it would struggle for a passing grade. But until the County withdraws it, it's the official view. It's now being used to design our airport for an expansion—to be funded with a third of a billion public dollars—to receive more and bigger planes, private *and* airline. If that's OK because the Coalition doesn't expect those planes to come, then why build it?

The FAA is supposed to respect local laws and rules, which citizens may soon usefully clarify. We therefore [suggested](#) the County withdraw the fake forecast, resubmit an honest one validly based on historical data (but previously rejected because it didn't call for bigger planes as the FAA demanded), forego future FAA discretionary grants, amply replace them with financing [supported](#) by the 20-fold increase in the guaranteed minimum payments offered by the FBO operator (just as the County's own plan would do despite FAA grants), and offer to fix the runway immediately, right where it is, at County expense as soon as the FAA approves that plan. Then we'd see if the FAA really wants to renege on this reasonable offer, which it twice [made](#) to the BOCC last year—or to take responsibility for prioritizing bureaucratic rigidity over its own access goals, reputation, and community acceptance.

Meanwhile, the County is quietly seeking ways (without quite breaking FAA rules) to pressure the airlines to adopt the bigger planes that the airlines and Coalition agree aren't right for Aspen. The airlines' aversion doesn't mean, as Goldfarb assumes, that bigger airline planes wouldn't come here if allowed—and the bigger *private* planes he doesn't count surely would.

Bait-and-switch arguments

Only at the end of July 2024 did the Coalition—not the County—admit that its Airbuses have no Aspen business case, as our dismissed [critique](#) had said 14 months earlier. The same day the newspapers announced the Coalition, our dominant airline made its preference for regional jets devastatingly clear by ordering 19 brand-new ones. That demolished a decade of County insistence, including consultants' instructions to ASE Vision, that no alternative regional jet was available. Since 2012, that was the bedrock reason for a new airfield to fit the bigger planes “needed” to preserve commercial air service. Remember that history?

Now, with whiplash-inducing speed, the Coalition has abandoned that vanished core argument—even bizarrely [claiming](#) it's a “false narrative...by a few vocal airport opponents”—and substituted new claims about safety. Yet the County, when asked, could provide no analysis showing the airport has a safety problem, nor how the new layout would fix it. If the FAA has suddenly discovered a major flaw in its 1999 safety analysis setting our 95-foot wingspan limit, that'd be big news, but there's no evidence any safety problem exists. As Deputy County Manager Rich Englehart [said](#) in 2021, “We have a very safe airport,” “about as safe as it can possibly be.” If it weren't, the FAA would close it. And the brand-new E175s, like the 2016 Airbuses, offer new avionics now, plus in 2026 new radars to aid safe landings in bad weather.

Since United's E175 order ensures commercial service for decades without Airbuses, the Coalition has hurriedly jettisoned the County's 12-year vision of an Airbus-based fleet. *Yet the Coalition's and County's environmental claims, and the County's official forecast, still assume that very same fleet!* Goldfarb lamely tries to patch this cognitive dissonance by saying the County “seeks to future-proof the airport to accommodate the Airbus 220 in the event that the E-175 one day goes out of service”—an aircraft of which SkyWest, which runs Aspen's three airline services, is the world's largest operator. But that's a very costly insurance policy against a contingency decades hence, well past the design life of a new runway. Choosing that risky new layout now would be needless and imprudent, because aviation technology is in enormous flux. Which leads to another quadruple Pinocchio:

Do we need bigger wingspans?

Four Coalition FAQs claim that efficient, climate-friendly, electric planes must have wider wingspans. But fourfold repetition does not make it so. Longer wings are indeed the classic design approach: one Dutch battery-electric aircraft design with a nearly 138-foot wing-

span, more than a 737, is said to carry 90 passengers for 500 miles. But wider wingspans haven't been the *only* valid option since a fully flight-tested air-taxi design with 52-foot wingspan but “super-laminar” (ultrasmooth) aerodynamics was revealed four years ago, combining Aspen-to-London range with one-eighth the normal fuel use. We promptly notified the BOCC of that new evidence, and [confirmed](#) that electric versions with regional-jet range and capacity would fit our current airfield.

Since then, for 22 months, we've been trying in vain to get the AAB to hear our brief on this and many other aspects of the aviation revolution, while some County Staff continue to promote outdated denials. That blockade on evidence perpetuates official ignorance of this important strategic context. Our view of ASE's future doesn't rely on speculative future technologies. But we do think United's E175 choice now buys more than enough time to see how future planes turn out, before choosing and designing an airport expansion that may well be no longer fit for purpose by about the time it could be built.

Unknown to Commissioners and their advisors, the aviation revolution keeps accelerating. In January 2024, McKinsey found more electric planes than fueled planes are already on order worldwide. That \$118 billion worth of electric orders (not all firm) from 55 operators aren't just air mini-taxis from little startups as Goldfarb implies (by cherrypicking a few tiny dots from our analysis, barely visible on our rich [graph](#) of which fuel-free planes are expected when). About 9,000 of the larger types on order have up to 30 seats (ideal for direct service to thousands of North American cities and more abroad), even 100+ seats, with rapidly rising range and superior economics. They're developed by many of the world's leading manufacturers and funded by major airlines, including all three now serving ASE. Aspen Fly Right's 2022 assessment—that by the time the County could build a new airfield, its chosen Airbuses will struggle to compete with superefficient electric and hydrogen planes—has become the informed modern view. My annual Stanford [lecture](#) “Fossil-Free Flight” validates it. On May 28, 2024, two top aeronautics professors heard it, reporting no errors.

Basic risks and choices

Goldfarb confuses the airlines' aversion to bigger planes with certainty that they won't come here. I do not agree, as he claims, that this risk is zero. Even if underhanded County efforts to reverse airlines' preferences fail, airlines will add planes and sell seats to meet demand for as many people can book a pillow and buy a ticket. Locals—and, the biggest concern, remote investors with no stake in the community—have overwhelming incentives to turn homes into Short-Term-Rental mini-hotels. County enforcement is weak. Development forces generally win case-by-case decisions. It's unclear why these political realities would abruptly reverse. Must we then give up on a half-century of thoughtful growth management launched by visionary Commissioners? Where is their vision today?

Truly effective STR enforcement, as part of comprehensively revitalized growth management, could indeed constrain pillow count and hence passenger growth, both for airlines

and for their potentially much larger private-jet competitors. But our community's history gives scant grounds for confidence that greed won't enable enormous passenger growth by needlessly expanding the airfield. Airport expansion doesn't *ensure* passenger growth, but is explicitly forecasted and designed to *enable* it. Why unnecessarily risk turning already-degraded Aspen into Vail, or worse?

Are you confident that letting in bigger planes of all kinds is OK because we can rely on our local governments to throttle the soaring pillow count that they can't control now? Are you sure our community can host two-thirds more airline passengers than now—the half-million in 2050 forecasted by the FAA, plus potentially up to severalfold more on private charters and air taxis, plus more forever after as the FAA forecast (to which further FAA funding would continue to bind us) keeps growing with national GDP?

Do you think all those people will find places to sleep, eat, ski, park, and do everything else in our little Valley without outbidding you and crowding you out? And do you really think the FAA would continue to pursue 1% private-jet access gains (from the four specifically named types) in the face of contrary citizen sentiment? The triviality of that gain scarcely justifies the fiscal and political cost to the FAA. But for the community, the potentially added planes, including the much larger categories Goldfarb ignored, are 13 times more numerous and their passenger totals are severalfold larger than he assumed, so the risk from noise, pollution, climate change, and crowding is far worse than he admits.

If you're not confident about Goldfarb's fuzzy math, Aspen Fly Right has accurate information, documented research, and pragmatic recommendations to help you and your neighbors make thoughtful choices. Restraining needless airport expansion can future-proof our community from adding a dangerous new enabler of runaway growth that could irreversibly threaten our quality of life.