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Congress of the United States House of Representatives

October 16, 2023

Polly Trottenberg
Administrator (Acting)
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue SW
Washington, DC 20591

Administrator Trottenberg:

I write to express concern regarding continued air traffic control safety lapses at Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (ABIA) and respectfully urge you to take swift and forceful action to address the root causes of these ongoing issues, which endanger the travelling public. A number of my constituents have expressed concern following recent news reports in the [Austin-American Statesman](#), the [Washington Post](#), and the [New York Times](#), which describe an unacceptable number of near misses, including:^[1]

- November 2022 near miss between Southwest and American Airlines aircraft
- February 2023 incident between a landing FedEx plane and a Southwest plane departing on the same runway
- April 2023 incident where a SkyWest jet was routed to ascend into the path of a descending Southwest plane

Most recently, the FAA released details on yet another incident where on September 23 the routing of a military F/A-18 jet caused a NetJets Cessna Citation to take evasive action, as well as on the ground coming into close proximity to a small propeller-powered aircraft preparing for takeoff.

From both these press reports and my discussions with local air traffic controllers, ABIA air traffic controller staffing levels are inadequate to safely handle the growing level of traffic our airport is experiencing. This poses a public threat which should be immediately addressed. For instance, ABIA's tower and approach control volume has increased 30% from pre-Covid volumes. Since September 2022, ABIA has qualified as a "Large Hub," accounting for more than 1% of total enplanements in the National Airport System.

^[1] See Chase Rodgers, "Private Jet Took 'Evasive Action' to Avoid a Fighter Plane at Austin Airport, FAA Says," *Austin-American Statesman*, October 11, 2023; Ian Duncan, "A Private Jet Took Evasive Action to Avoid a Fighter Plane in Austin," *Washington Post*, October 10, 2023 and Sydney Ember and Emily Steel, "How a Series of Air Traffic Control Lapses Nearly Killed 113 People," *New York Times*, October 11, 2023.

Yet despite this sizable increase in traffic, controller staffing at ABIA has not increased. According to your Administration, Austin has just 35 fully certified controllers, about 40% below the target level jointly set by the FAA and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association. ABIA is working over 70% of its shifts below FAA guideline numbers for appropriate staffing. Such short staffing leads to exhaustion and unsafe working conditions, with controllers routinely working 6-day weeks and amassing hundreds of hours of overtime with no end in sight.


As you are aware, with my strong support, the House of Representatives approved H.R. 3935, the FAA reauthorization, entitled the Securing Growth and Robust Leadership in American Aviation Act. This bill makes a number of reforms that will improve safety at ABIA, including mandating the FAA adopt a new staffing model in its Controller Workforce Plan to better reflect actual needs, directing the FAA to hire the maximum amount of air traffic controllers from the FAA training academy and authorizing all large and medium hub airports to have ground surveillance and detection equipment -- equipment that ABIA currently lacks. Hopefully, the Senate will act soon on this legislation.

While these legislative changes will be welcome, I do not believe ABIA can wait for its enactment and implementation. The FAA should take immediate action to improve the safety of the traveling public at ABIA. To address the dangerously low level Certified Professional Controller staffing, I would appreciate your prompt response to the following requests:

- Designate ABIA as a level 10 terminal facility. ABIA currently ranks as a "medium" level 9, and by increasing ABIA's ranking our airport's extraordinary growth and traffic levels will be better reflected and will bring more resources, more appropriate compensation for controllers, and generate a morale boost for the overworked controller workforce.
- Grant ABIA priority consideration in future rounds of National Centralized ERR (Employee Requested Reassignment) Process Team (NCEPT) until the airport's workforce is able to support staffing an appropriate number of controllers.
- Allow Operational Supervisor/Controller-in-Charge to provide oversight without concurrently working Flight Data/Clearance Delivery.
- Provide a minimum of 12 hours of On-the-Job Training to each Certified Professional Controller In-Training each week.
- Upgrade the airspace levels surrounding ABIA by either extending the boundaries of Class Charlie Airspace or even upgrading the surrounding airspace to Class Bravo, thereby tripling the amount of protected airspace around ABIA and mitigating controller workload by reducing the amount of traffic flying in close proximity to the airport without a requirement to inform air traffic controllers of their position.

Thank you for your prompt attention to these matters, and I eagerly await your response.

Sincerely,



Lloyd Doggett