

May 3, 2007

Honorable Bill Nelson
United States Senate
716 Senate Hart Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Re: proposed Bay County Airport

Dear Senator:

We understand that you may be supporting the Bay County Airport Authority's desire to greatly expand the size of the current airport at a new location 20 miles north of Panama City. Recently it has come to our attention that you may be trying to help the Airport Authority find federal funding for the construction of this new airport, since the FAA has told you that it is unlikely there will be Letter of Intent funding from the FAA.

The Clean Water Network of Florida, Citizens for the Bay, Friends of PFN, and Florida Sierra Club, as well as the other groups signed below, would request that you re-evaluate the facts surrounding this controversial airport and consider withdrawing your support for federal dollars to be spent on this proposed project. We can all agree that state and federal tax dollars should not be squandered on projects that do not serve a public interest purpose. We can all list numerous deserving projects that should be funded if monies were available. Senator Nelson, we are asking for your help in ensuring that taxpayer dollars are not used to subsidize this unnecessary airport.

You have always been a very public-interest driven person and we count on you to use your power and influence in Washington to defend the interest of ordinary citizens, protect the environment and stand up for good government. Please consider the following facts about this project. If you need more documentation on any of these points, please let us know and we will be more than happy to provide it for you. Also, additional information is provided in the attached letter to the FAA from Clean Water Network of Florida and other environmental organizations.

- 1 **The current cost projection to build this airport is \$331 million.** It has already cost the public over \$40 million in studies, the majority of which came from state coffers, through the Florida Department of Transportation. Since costs will continue to escalate, we can expect the final total to reach over a half-billion dollars, with the state picking up still more of that tab. And should the airport fail financially, which is a real likelihood considering economic realities, the state will likely get tapped for more taxpayers' funds for the bailout.
- 2 The existing Panama City airport is adequate to serve the area's needs into the distant future. Recently, a new terminal was built and an access road improved at considerable expense to the taxpayers. The practically-new terminal is under-utilized and nearly empty most of the time. FAA's latest air capacity study indicated there is no need for extra capacity in northwest Florida for at least the next 20 years. Also, the newly designed jets require less runway length.

- 3 Air traffic projections show no increase that would justify this new airport. Indeed, traffic has been falling off and airlines have cut back service to the existing airport in recent years, and, despite a building boom in Bay-Walton Counties, service is now down from 25 round-trip airline flights per day in 2001 to just 12 per day in 2007. While the local area is a tourist destination, studies have continuously shown that most visitors arrive by car, not by plane. Considering these factors, there is no evidence to support that a major new airport will ever be needed.
- 4 The new airport will be very environmentally destructive. The site chosen is in wetlands in the headwaters of West Bay, which is part of the ecologically sensitive St. Andrew Bay ecosystem. The airport would destroy important springs and feeder creeks that sustain the bay system, and require filling in over 1,900 acres of wetlands on the airport site. An additional 9,000 acres of wetlands would be destroyed from subsequent development associated with the airport. This massive filling of wetlands and diversion of freshwater inflow in the headwaters of West Bay will effectively destroy this currently very healthy and productive estuary.
- 5 To justify a new airport located on property donated by the St Joe company, proponents have claimed the current runway is unsafe because it does not meet the newer FAA standard for runway overrun area. This is nothing more than a red herring. About 40% of the nation's airports do not meet the newer FAA standard, yet they are not building new airports to comply. Runway length is not a hindrance to the growth of airport operations, nor does it cause airlines to shun an airport. The John Wayne Airport in Orange County, California has a shorter main runway than that of the Panama City airport (5700 ft compared to Panama City's 6300 ft), yet it handled 9.6 million passengers in 2006, while the Panama City airport transported only 355,000 that same year. The EIS ignored or dismissed with little consideration very viable, much less expensive and less environmentally destructive alternatives to accommodate purported runway length issue, such as the use of effective and proven Engineered Materials Arresting Systems, or the rerouting of adjacent roads. (See www.citizensforthebay.org and www.ecoastlife.com for analysis and comment on the EIS.)
- 6 The FAA is presently considering the mandatory Benefit-Cost Analysis (BCA) before deciding the amount and type of construction funding to be awarded. The BCA foresees very modest aviation benefits and would not show a positive benefit/cost ratio if it did not, questionably, rely on benefits to private companies from real estate sales through the redevelopment of the old airport site and speculation on development of industrial sites at the new airport. **The BCA thus confirms the real reason for the project—the enhancement of real estate development for private entities.** This is not the purpose of the FAA, and certainly not the purpose for spending millions of state and federal dollars.
- 7 The new airport is not even wanted by the population it will serve. The proposed location is an unreasonable 20 miles from the population center, making this airport much less accessible than the current one. In a non-binding referendum in

2004, **the voters of Bay County turned it down**, 56 to 44%, despite the skewed ballot language which promised the airport “at no cost to county taxpayers.” Actually, this airport will cost local citizens a great deal due to its infrastructure needs as well as the cost of time, fuel and fares in commuting to this distant airport.

- 8 **The main beneficiary of this “airport to nowhere” will be the St. Joe Company**, which owns the land proposed for the airport as well as thousands of surrounding acres with development potential dependent on the new airport. A state and federally subsidized airport will mean that our tax dollars will provide the infrastructure that St. Joe needs to realize maximum profits on their developments. The company plans to market what is now a paper-product forest, as upscale residential and commercial developments. Land that was once worth very little will now be seen as potentially very valuable by speculators. The company will make billions of dollars from this unjustified airport built and paid for by the taxpayers.
- 9 The current status of the airport’s permitting is that the FAA issued its Record of Decision favoring the project on September 15, 2006. The ROD has been challenged by the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), Defenders of Wildlife and Friends of PFN. That case is pending in federal court. While it has received its Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) permit, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 404 permit is still pending, but is expected to be issued soon, and may be subject to challenge.

Senator Nelson, we would be very grateful if you would at least consider this information before you invest anymore of your influence and valuable time in this project. We feel certain that when you have an opportunity to review this new information you will reconsider support for spending federal funds on this “airport to nowhere.” We look forward to hearing from someone on your staff and please call on us for any further information that you may need.

Very warm regards,

Linda L. Young, Director
Clean Water Network of
Florida, Inc.
Tallahassee, FL

42 additional groups and 29 individuals signed on to this letter.