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The High Social Costs of Airport Expansion

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The Washington Post and others have reported on airline flight delays and poor passenger service numerous times in the past year. The airlines and airport authorities are complaining that to meet burgeoning demand they need more airport capacity, which translates to more flights. Dulles International Airport is one such airport that will be adding two runways.

Last April the Congress and President Clinton responded to the aviation industry with legislation called AIR-21. This bill provides billions of dollars to upgrade airport infrastructure. Earlier this month, the aviation industry and the Department of Transportation (DOT) held a summit here in Washington D.C. to look for ways to speed up the airport expansion effort. An industry-led Runway Coalition went so far as to push for restrictions on local airport communities so they cannot effectively participate in the planning of these expansions. At the summit, DOT Secretary Mineta said,"We begin today to ease the process of review for expansion of airport capacity." Words like these cause great concern in the environmental community and to citizens who live near airports and their flight paths. We object to Sec. Mineta's apparent attempt to bypass the National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA) which requires full community involvement in all such undertakings.

Local communities are questioning airport expansion because of their concern for the social costs of aircraft pollution; that is, the noise aircraft generate, the toxic chemicals spewed from their exhausts, and the chemicals used to deice the aircraft. With air traffic increasing, pollution can only get worse. Noise is the most obvious concern, generating health problems like sleep deprivation and learning disabilities for children whose schools are located under flight paths.

As serious as the noise problem is, however, it is only the tip of the aviation pollution iceberg. Jet aircraft air pollution is the main culprit. It cannot be seen or heard, and that is worrisome to us. People are assuming that the Government is watching out for their interests, but airline interests seem to come first. Studies, which indicate the magnitude of the problem, have been slow in coming, but coming they are, and they are showing the very thing the Government and the aviation industry do not want to hear, that we may be facing a long term public health calamity from aircraft air pollution. The health risk is especially true for people living within a few miles of a large airport – like National or Dulles - or its flight paths. People who live outside this zone will have less risk, but not

zero risk. When one considers that 70 percent of the U.S. population lives within 20 miles of a major airport, one can envision the proportions of this problem.

What is the evidence to support our concern? From King County Department of Public Health, Washington State, we learn that compared to other areas of King County, cancer rates within three miles of Boeing Field were 36 percent higher. Likewise heart disease and asthma were each 57 percent greater, respiratory diseases were 26 percent higher, and infant mortality was 50 percent higher.

In Birmingham, Alabama, Federal health statistics indicate that for the communities of East Lake and Woodlawn, located near or at the end of the airport runway, coronary heart disease is over 70 percent higher than the average of other Alabama communities. Cancer rates for these two communities were nearly double the state averages.

Outside the perimeter of Chicago's O'Hare Airport, the second busiest airport in the country, the results are worse, a cancer rate five times that other Chicagoans, according to Citizens Aviation Watch, a national aviation environmental group. A University of Illinois School of Public Medicine study estimates that pollution from O'Hare's seven runways could be affecting the health of five million individuals.

These are scary statistics indeed, and point to the urgency of addressing the issue before rushing pell-mell into airport expansion. The above studies show us the smoking gun. In light of these data, the Federal Government should fund independent investigations which either confirm or refute these statistics. With air traffic expected to double in the next 12 years, the American public has a right to know what sort of health risks it is facing if people choose to live near an airport.