

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 10, 2023

The Honorable Maria Cantwell
Chair
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce,
Science, & Transportation
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ted Cruz
Ranking Member
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce,
Science, & Transportation
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chair Cantwell and Ranking Member Cruz:

As Congress prepares to consider the 2023 Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) reauthorization bill, we would like to make clear our strong opposition to any attempts at changing the current High Density (slot) and perimeter rules at Washington National (DCA) Airport.

DCA and Washington Dulles International (IAD) Airports are the federal government's only commercial airports. Historically, the federal government operated and managed the airports as a single system with the two airports having complementary roles. Acknowledging the physical limitations of DCA, the federal government, by the High-Density Rule (or "slot" rule) controlled the number of flights into or out of the airport by each carrier, and by the "Perimeter" rule, limited non-stop service to or from DCA to 650 miles with some exceptions (since expanded to 1,250 miles). IAD was planned as the growth airport for the region's aviation needs. When Congress passed the Metropolitan Washington Airports Transfer Act in 1986 to transfer DCA and IAD to the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority (MWAA), it continued this policy by requiring that MWAA operate and manage the airports as a unit and codifying the Perimeter Rule.

For most of the airports' history, this plan worked well, as passenger activity at IAD increased while the restrictions at DCA kept flight activity there relatively stable, consistent with facility constraints. Billions of dollars in capital investments from MWAA and the federal government allowed the system to accommodate new demand. MWAA's work also helped achieve a balance with Thurgood Marshall Baltimore Washington International (BWI) Airport so that the broader interests of the Maryland-DC-Virginia region were aligned. The effectiveness of this aviation system helped stimulate massive private-sector investment in metropolitan Washington, as evidenced by the relocation of such major corporate headquarters as Hilton Hotels and Volkswagen to offices near our area airports. Under these original guidelines, there formed a world-class aviation system serving our nation's capital—one which could grow sustainably, serve all of our travelers capably, and help build a more dynamic regional economy.

However, Congressional changes to those rules in previous FAA reauthorization bills have disrupted the balance of a two-airport system. For over a decade, traffic at DCA has risen sharply, while IAD has declined or stagnated in the same measures. In 2010, total annual enplanements at IAD exceeded those at DCA by more than 5 million. At the end of 2019, before COVID-19 upended the national aviation industry, IAD outpaced DCA by less than a million

passengers annually. Now, as we begin to emerge from the pandemic and Americans return to travel, this pattern has worsened. Today, IAD trails DCA by more than 1 million.

These changes in flight activity—a direct result of legislative loosening of the slot and perimeter rules, combined with airline mergers and commercial transactions—have produced serious problems. They have led to significant stress on DCA’s facilities, from strained roadways and limited parking availability to overburdened baggage systems; creating frustrations for travelers, businesses, and local residents. Those changes have also prevented Dulles from realizing its full potential as the primary long-haul flight destination for the Washington metropolitan area. The more expansive facilities at Dulles allow larger planes to land and take off there, which yields efficiencies for customers, carriers, and our climate. Moreover, as an international airport, Dulles facilitates strong cultural and political connections between America’s capital and the rest of the world. In just the last decade, the federal government has spent significantly on IAD’s infrastructure, from the extension of Metrorail to the airport to the just-announced \$50 million grant from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law for construction of a new terminal. These projects are rightly considered an investment in the future. Unlike DCA, IAD can host a growing air travel industry for years to come.

For the foregoing reasons, we will strongly oppose efforts to make changes at airports that serve our communities and constituents.

Thank you for your leadership in the critical area of aviation policy. We look forward to working with you to pass an FAA Reauthorization bill this year that leaves intact the current rules governing operations at DCA.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Benjamin L. Cardin
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator