

## **Airport Improvement Program: 75 Years Old and Still Going Strong**

When President Calvin Coolidge signed the Air Commerce Act into law on May 20, 1926, the Secretary of Commerce became responsible for the first federal regulation of aviation in the United States. The act instructed the Secretary to foster air commerce; designate and establish airways; establish, operate, and maintain aids to air navigation; arrange for research and development to improve such aids; license pilots; issue airworthiness certificates for aircraft and major aircraft components; and investigate accidents. The new law did not include aid to airports.



September 21, 1937, Many Airport, Many, Louisiana, Sabine Parish. Source: State Library of Louisiana

### **Depression Era Aid**

The federal government, however, began providing airport aid during the depression as a means of jobs creation. On November 9, 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt created the Civil Works Administration (CWA), an emergency program designed to help jobless American during the winter of 1933-1934. On November 24, 1933, FAA's first predecessor agency, the Aeronautics Branch, announced an airport development program to be undertaken in cooperation with the CWA. The airport development work transferred to the Federal Emergency Relief Administration on April 15, 1934. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration became the Works Progress Administration (WPA) in 1935 (later renamed the Works Projects Administration).

While the Bureau of Air Commerce, which succeeded the Aeronautics Branch, worked with the WPA to build airports, Colonel J. Monroe Johnson, Assistant Secretary of Commerce, expressed concern about whether or not the airports would be able to handle future growth. He wondered if America's airports could handle the "new giants of the air, with their four or more engines, their 40-passenger capacity, their larger space for air mail and express," as well as their modern

designs characteristics. He urged the federal, state, and local governments to rethink their approach to building and expanding existing airports. “No nation nor a municipality in any nation can be wise that fails to make such sacrifice and expenditures as will make certain and sure that these modern roadways of the air come to their domain and at their doors.” He continued, “Woe be unto any nation that allows itself, by reason of its economic urge, to lag in this revolutionary form of transportation or unto any municipality that allows the crossroad that it might have had to be placed elsewhere. Where there is no vision, the people will perish.”



J. Monroe Johnson  
Source: *Charlotte News*,  
Newspapers.com

## **A New Law and Defense Appropriations**

On June 23, 1938, President Roosevelt signed the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938, which abolished the Bureau of Air Commerce and established the Civil Aeronautics Authority (CAA). The administrator's functions under the law included the encouragement of civil aeronautics and commerce, establishment of civil airways, provision and technical improvement of air navigation facilities, and the protection and regulation of air traffic along the airways. The legislation no longer excluded airports from the facilities the administrator could establish and maintain. The law directed the administrator to make a field survey of the existing system of airports and to present recommendations by February 1, 1939, on whether and how the federal government should participate in the development, operation, or maintenance of a national system of airports.

A. B. McMullen, CAA chief of airport and air marking, explained the survey would be “the first step in preparing a national airport plan – a guide or standard by which communities will know what type of airport to build, how large it should be and how long the runways should be, what particular type of airport should cost, and how long it should take to build it.” CAA provided interim survey results to Congress in February 1939 and the final report on March 23. The agency argued for the need of new airports by simply stating: “Without airports of some sort, there [will be] no flying, no aircraft industry, no occasion for the development of the aeronautical

arts and sciences. The better the airport provision, the greater the opportunity for the use of aircraft to serve the general welfare.”

The report indicated the number of municipal and commercial airports in the continental United States had increased from 823 at the end of 1927 to 1,907 at the end of 1938. Most of the growth had been funded by the federal relief programs. CAA noted the development and



A. B. McMullen  
Source: University of  
Texas Arlington

maintenance of an adequate system of airports (including seaplane bases) should be recognized as a matter of national concern and a proper object of federal expenditure. It recommended the federal government provide airports \$100 million of regular public-works or work-relief funds, as well as \$25 million to increase the federal share of joint federal-local projects. Plans for the location and development of any airport benefiting from federal aid should be approved by CAA.

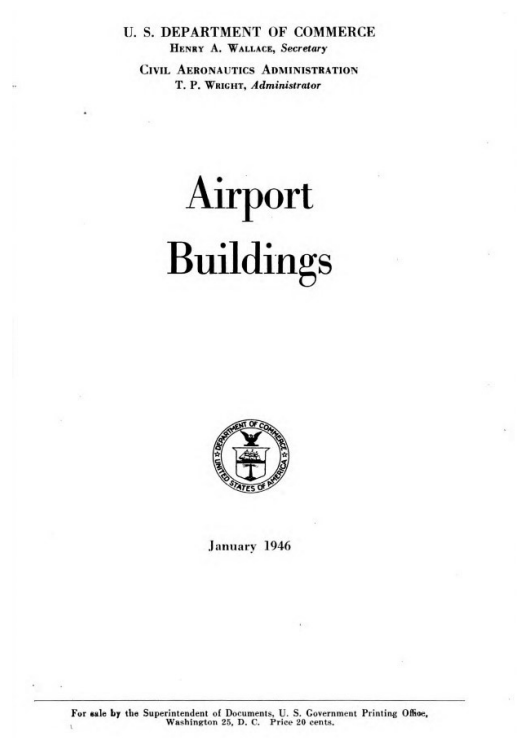
When Congress took no action on the plan, municipalities and airport organizations quickly condemned the lack of action. As Paul Betters, editor of the *United States Municipal News* wrote: “The present session of Congress draws to a close without formulation of a nation airport program . . . Those who expected the Civil Aeronautics Authority to assume leadership in actually bringing into being a national airport plan are thus doomed to disappointment.” Betters suggested: “Until such a time as the government established a federal airport plan . . . it seems useless, as well as inequitable, to further sink local taxpayers’ fund in airport development.”

On October 9, 1940, in the first appropriation made directly to CAA (now the Civil Aeronautics Administration) for airport development, Congress appropriated \$40 million for the construction, improvement, and repair of up to 250 public airports determined to be necessary for national defense. Under the Development of Landing Areas for National Defense (DLAND) program, the CAA administrator had responsibility for qualifying airports with the approval of a board composed of the Secretaries of War, Navy, and Commerce. To expedite development projects, CAA established cooperative arrangements with the WPA and the War and Navy Departments,

since those agencies performed the actual construction in many cases. The total expenditure for the DLAND program was \$383 million for 535 airports.

## Federal Airport Act

As the war began winding down in Europe, CAA began planning for scores of new airports. The agency estimated manufacturers would build 400,000 airplanes between 1945 and 1955. Demand for those planes would come from the “more than 300,000 pilots in uniform and 150,000 others in civilian life.” During the summer of 1944, the agency established an urban planning organization to provide planning assistance to local and state jurisdictions. Assistant Secretary of Commerce William Burden told local authorities, “Every town has a vital interest in the development of airports everywhere.” While there was some talk in Congress regarding federal airport grants, Burden noted, at the present time, “the financial responsibility for such landing areas will be a local one. . . I would urge everybody interested in airports, not to remain idle while awaiting Federal legislation. Investigate and plan your share in the nation’s airport program.” To help municipalities prepare for an airport or airport expansion, CAA began publishing a number of planning guides, such as “Airport Management,” “Airport Design,” “Small Airports,” “Airport Planning for Urban Areas,” “Airport Financial Statements,” “Standard Specifications for Construction of Airports,” and “Airport Buildings.”



On November 28, 1944, CAA submitted to Congress a revised National Airport Plan proposing federal and state support for airport improvements needed for a forecast increase in civil aviation. The plan recommended a one billion dollar program to build 3,050 new airports and make improvements at 1,625 airports over ten years. It was based on cooperative studies the agency had undertaken with local governmental or private interests seeking assistance for postwar airport planning.

In advocating for the expenditure, CAA pointed out: "By investing \$25,000,000 in roads during the last 25 years, we have made it possible for the United States to become a Nation on wheels . . . For a much small investment, we can start the United States on its way toward becoming a Nation on wings." The agency also argued, "With an adequate national airport system, civil aviation can grow to appoint where it becomes a substantial segment of the Nation's economy and sources of employment."

The plan helped stimulate the introduction of congressional bills on airport development. However, when Congress did not immediately act, CAA Administrator Charles Stanton began lobbying for a federal aid to airport program. He suggested the "people of the United States get behind an airport construction program, which . . . will give the nation an airport system matching the efficiency of our highway system." Stanton pointed out that "If the President and Congress authorize a federal airport program, the funds appropriated would be apportioned to the states by the CAA upon a basis of some accepted formula. Such a formula should take into account four factors – the area of the state, its population, the number of registered aircraft in the state and the existing number of accredited airports." In addition, each state would have to match some portion of the federal funds. Only sites included in the CAA's National Airport Plan would be eligible for federal aid. William Burden echoed this need. "A national airport system is so essential that its development cannot be laid away on a shelf of public works plans for use only in a period of widespread unemployment."

After a number of congressional hearings, Congress passed and President Harry Truman signed the Federal Airport Act (Public Law 377 of the 79<sup>th</sup> Congress) on May 13, 1946. The new law established the federal-aid airport program, the first peacetime program of financial aid aimed exclusively at promoting development of the nation's civil airports. Senator Pat McCarran (D-NV) and Representative Clarence F. Lea (D-CA) had introduced the legislation.

The act authorized appropriations of \$500 million for the contiguous United States and \$20 million for Alaska and Hawaii over a period of seven years, beginning July 1, 1946. Federal allotments were to be matched by local funds. For fiscal year 1947, Congress appropriated \$45 million for construction and nearly \$3 million for preliminary planning and surveys. CAA said it would begin taking preliminary grant applications on October 1, 1946. To administer the new program, CAA announced on October 8, the opening of 44 new airport district offices – 43 within the United States and one in Puerto Rico. The agency also established airport branches in its regional offices at Honolulu and Anchorage.

The act required CAA to make another survey of the nation's airport needs and update the National Airport Plan. Once it revised the plan, CAA could establish an organization to

administer the program. The agency completed the plan in December 1946. On January 9, 1947, CAA's regulations governing the administration of the aid program received final approval, and two days later the agency announced the 1947 construction program, which included 800 airports for either construction or improvement. The updated plan contained a three-year forecast of requirements involving 4,431 locations.



The Federal Airport Act of 1946 drew its funding from the general fund of the U.S. Treasury. Twin Falls, Idaho, became the first community to receive a grant when, on May 7, the CAA administrator signed papers for the construction of an airport at a cost of about \$647,000, of which \$384,000 would be Federal funds. By December 17, 1947, the administrator had made 127 grant offers to local sponsors totaling \$12,966,628.

## Looking Forward

Since its inception 75 years ago, the federal airport program has undergone a number of changes to keep current with new regulations and airport needs. Funds obligated for the current program, the airport improvement program (AIP) are drawn from the Airport and Airway Trust fund, which is supported by user fees, fuel taxes, and other similar revenue sources. AIP continues to provide grants to public agencies — and, in some cases, to private owners and entities — for the planning and development of public-use airports included in the National

[Plan of Integrated Airport Systems \(NPIAS\)](#). The investment of nearly \$3.2 billion annually into infrastructure projects around the country ensures safety and security, environmental sustainability, and improves access to diverse communities that depend on airports for transportation as well as receiving goods and services.

For information on the AIP, see [Airport Improvement Program Overview and Eligible Projects](#).