

Testimony of Representative Peter J. Visclosky (IN-1)
S. 1786, The National Aviation Capacity Expansion Act
March 21, 2002

Mr. Chairman, Mr. Rockefeller, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to submit testimony regarding S. 1786, the National Aviation Capacity Expansion Act, and to discuss the important role of the Gary/Chicago Airport (GCA) as a regional partner in resolving the Chicago Metropolitan Area's capacity problem. I am opposed to S. 1786 in its current form.

Over the last decade and a half, the future lack of air capacity in the Chicago Metropolitan Area, and its negative impact on our nation's air transportation system has been recognized. In the past, the States of Wisconsin, Indiana, and Illinois attempted to achieve a consensus solution. Subsequently, Indiana and Illinois entered into a bi-state initiative. The legislation before us today is a unilateral response to this problem, and therefore, I find it wanting.

I am a supporter of increased airport capacity in the Chicago Metropolitan Area, and I commend Senator Durbin for seeking solutions that will increase our regions capacity. Increasing air capacity in the Chicago Metropolitan Area is a national concern. Air congestion is a regional problem, not just a Chicago problem, or an Illinois problem. It demands a regional answer to address this national concern. As a resident of Northwest Indiana, and the Representative of Indiana's First Congressional District, I feel that my constituents and I have a vested interest in the air traffic congestion challenges facing the region.

The Chicago Metropolitan Area is facing a severe air traffic capacity shortage. The growing demand that has been placed on Chicago's O'Hare International and Midway Airports has stretched the resources at those facilities to their limits. O'Hare has been able to grow by one percent or less for the past three years, and Midway, absorbing the excess, is estimated to have an additional one million passengers per year for the next two years. As capacity has become maximized at those facilities, GCA, located 25 miles from downtown Chicago, in Gary, Indiana, has played an increasingly valuable role in delivering passenger and cargo service to the area. With highway connections that include I-90, I-80/94, I-65, U.S. 12, and U.S. 20, GCA offers convenient access to the entire Chicago Metropolitan Area.

Let me be clear: there already is a third commercial airport now servicing the Chicago Metropolitan Area. In 1995, Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley joined Gary Mayor Thomas Barnes to form the Chicago-Gary Regional Airport Authority Compact. Consequently, GCA became the reliever airport for the congestion in the Chicago Metropolitan Area. Subsequently, commercial service was introduced in Gary in 1999, and in 2000, GCA was designated as a primary airport in the State of Indiana. Last year, Congress allocated \$1,000,000 for improvements at GCA. Those funds have allowed the airport to make significant enhancements in the service it provides by improving security and expanding the general use apron, providing approximately 11,000 square yards of pavement, enough frontage for two medium sized hangars.

This piece of legislation suggests that part of the solution to the problem of congestion in the Chicago Metropolitan Area is to build another airport, roughly 40 miles away from the Loop. I believe that building another airport at this time would mean unnecessarily spending millions of taxpayer dollars and destroying irreplaceable acres of green space. Additionally, this crisis cannot wait the length of time that it necessitates to build another airport. The region's current capacity shortage can not wait 20 years for a solution.

S. 1786 would create unfair funding preferences by moving the expansion of O'Hare and the construction of Peotone to the top of the Federal Aviation Administration's (FAA) funding priority list. Airport Improvement Program (AIP) funding is very limited, and under current law, the FAA must use its judgment to determine which projects will have the greatest benefit to the national transportation system. Although the O'Hare project may prove the most beneficial for the national transportation system, this bill would not allow the FAA to come to that decision, rather, it would dictate that decision to the FAA. As a result all other airport projects in the country would suffer by having their funding either severely limited or reduced.

Under current law, the people of Illinois have the option of deciding which emissions will be allowed, in order to comply with the Clean Air Act. S. 1786 would eliminate this option. The Environmental Protection Agency would be required to develop a plan that will ensure that the added emissions, which will result from construction and operation of the O'Hare project, will be allowed, and that necessary offsets will be created by limiting emissions from other transportation and business activities.

GCA, located only thirty minutes from downtown Chicago, is well positioned to provide immediate relief from many of the congestion issues currently facing O'Hare and Midway Airports. GCA can already land any plane Midway is now handling. At 7,000 feet, GCA's runway is already 450 feet longer than Midway's longest runway. GCA currently offers daily passenger service, and has the ability to triple its number of flights without additional capital expenditures. The airport is severely underutilized, and without further construction, or additional funding, GCA could accommodate as many as 150,000 flights per year.

On November 27, 2001, the Federal Aviation Administration approved GCA's 20- year Master Plan. The Master Plan outlines the airport's existing facilities, ability to handle air traffic, growth and economic forecasts, and identifies the short and long-term infrastructure needs that will facilitate continued growth and expansion. GCA has 8,200 acres of an Airport Development Zone, offering tax and investment benefits for businesses, and over thirteen acres available for developing air cargo operations. Additionally, GCA is designated as a foreign trade zone. As capacity has become maximized at O'Hare and Midway, GCA has played an increasingly valuable role in delivering passenger and cargo service to the area.

In a June 12, 2001 meeting with the Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta, I expressed the importance of the role GCA already plays in reducing congestion in the Chicago Metropolitan Area. As you continue your efforts to address Chicago's capacity issues, we urge you not to ignore GCA as a critical element in resolving many of these challenges

I thank you for your time and your consideration in this very important matter. I look forward to continuing to work with you to find a practical solution to this very serious problem.