

**TESTIMONY OF LESTER CROWN, CHAIRMAN OF MATERIAL  
SERVICE CORPORATION AND CHAIR OF CIVIC  
COMMITTEE'S AVIATION TASK FORCE**

**HEARING BEFORE THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON  
COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION  
JUNE 15, 2001**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman. My name is Lester Crown. I am a member of the Civic Committee of The Commercial Club of Chicago and Chair of its Aviation Task Force. On behalf of our members, I would like to thank you, along with the other Committee members and Senators here today, for allowing us the opportunity to share the business community's viewpoint on the Chicago region's aviation future. We appreciate your efforts to solve the shortage of aviation capacity – which we can all agree has reached a crisis stage across the country. Nowhere is the problem more pressing than at O'Hare Airport, which has become a major bottleneck in the national aviation system.

The Civic Committee – a group of 68 senior executives from the Chicago region's leading businesses, professional firms, and universities – is dedicated to improving Chicago as a place to live, work, and conduct business. We believe that a strong and efficient aviation system is essential to the economic vitality and livability of Chicago and Northern Illinois. Our members have offices and plants throughout the city and suburbs, including in the communities around O'Hare. We have employees who use O'Hare for business and/or personal travel. We clearly have a huge stake in the economic and aviation future of the region; and we are unanimous in our support for adding runway capacity at O'Hare. In fact, we've been advocating new runways at O'Hare for almost 20 years.

One of the Chicago region's proudest legacies is its historic position as a major transportation center of the United States. Chicago developed as a major industrial, commercial, and financial center, and its businesses have grown and provided jobs for millions of people, because of ready access to efficient surface and air transportation networks. Chicago grew initially because of its proximity to the inland waterway transportation network. It later became a major commercial center in the 19<sup>th</sup> century because it was a hub for the nation's major railways. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the beginnings of commercial aviation, Chicago has been the leading aviation center in the United States. Midway Airport was at one time the busiest airport in the country. It was succeeded by O'Hare Airport, which became – and for decades remained – the busiest airport in the world.

Chicago's growth as a transportation center was good not just for Chicago, but for the entire country. Our rail switching operations provided essential linkages for transcontinental movements of freight, linking suppliers and consumers throughout the country. O'Hare airport now serves the same role in the national aviation system – as a vital hub for the movement of both passengers and cargo. Both United and American

Airlines operate networks of connecting flights and schedules at O'Hare; and several dozen other airlines also have significant operations at the airport. Roughly half of the airport's passengers originate or terminate their trips at O'Hare, benefiting Chicago and the region. But, as many of you know from personal experience, the other half of the passengers use O'Hare as a connecting point to another destination. Similarly, many air freight shippers use O'Hare as an intermediate point for their freight shipments.

Today, Chicago's pre-eminence as a transportation center is in jeopardy. O'Hare Airport is approaching its capacity limitations. Its operations have remained stagnant at approximately 900,000 for the past few years, while other airports have experienced substantial increases in the number of flights. Flight delays and cancellations at O'Hare – due primarily to inadequate runways – have reached an all-time high, creating a ripple effect across the country. The increasing delays and declining service at O'Hare adversely impact not only the people of Northern Illinois, but the citizens and businesses in Arizona, West Virginia, and other states throughout the country. Although other major American metropolitan centers – including Atlanta, Dallas/Ft. Worth, and Denver – have built new airports and added new runways, or are planning to build new runways, Chicago has not built new runway facilities at O'Hare for decades.

According to a study conducted by Booz Allen and Hamilton for the Civic Committee, aviation demand is projected to increase substantially in the future, with a significant portion of the projected increase in international traffic. International traffic at O'Hare grew at a rate of over 12 percent between 1996-99. Because of its central location and scope of operations, O'Hare is a natural to become the primary mid-continent international aviation hub.

In order to protect and enhance its role as a primary aviation hub, Booz Allen concluded that Chicago should add new runways at O'Hare now. Additional runway capacity at O'Hare would significantly reduce delays and improve the efficiency of the national aviation system. Unfortunately, little progress has been made with respect to increasing runway capacity at O'Hare because of competing efforts to build a third airport at Peotone and concerns about noise in the communities around O'Hare. Let me address these issues one at a time.

First, a new airport at Peotone or elsewhere may be a good idea to accommodate the projected increase in point-to-point flights and promote economic development throughout the region. We are on record in support of land-banking for a third airport in Peotone to provide the region with the flexibility to meet increased aviation demand in the future. But a new airport in Peotone is not a substitute for expanding O'Hare's position as an international and domestic hub. Capping the number of flights at O'Hare or splitting its hub operations with a new airport would lead to disaster. Similar efforts failed in Paris and Montreal.

Secondly, we recognize that the communities around O'Hare also have a stake in the future of the airport. They have quality of life concerns related to the airport's operations, such as noise and traffic congestion, that must be addressed. However, we do

not believe that the solution to addressing these issues is to allow O'Hare to wither on the vine. Once the City releases a detailed plan for the airport, it will undergo an extensive review process, including an environmental evaluation. Many of these quality of life concerns will be addressed during this process. Hundreds of millions of dollars have already been spent by Chicago on soundproofing homes and schools around the airport; and we believe that any agreement to reconfigure O'Hare should commit additional resources to further mitigate noise and traffic concerns. There are other issues that need to be addressed, including Western access to the airport, but none of these should be allowed to block the immediate improvement of O'Hare.

We appreciate the efforts of this Committee and other members of Congress to improve O'Hare and its impact on the national aviation system. Certainly, our preference is to have this issue resolved on the local level, and we are encouraged by recent indications from Governor Ryan and Mayor Daley that they will soon consider plans to expand runway capacity at O'Hare. However, if all else fails – and our local leaders cannot reach an agreement – then the Federal government should step in and resolve the issue.

There are a number of initiatives that Congress should consider in the interim to help improve O'Hare and the national aviation system. For example, Congress should streamline the environmental review process for runway construction. According to the FAA, it takes them nearly 4 years, sometimes longer, to complete an environmental review of a runway construction project. As you know, the lengthy review process has bogged down runway expansion projects at other airports around the country. Congress should also empower the FAA to speed up the technological advancement of the nation's air traffic control system. Lastly, Congress should fund adequate capital and operational investments in aviation to ensure a safe and efficient national aviation system in the future.

We, the Chicago region and the nation, cannot afford to allow O'Hare to languish in delays and unfulfilled potential. If we fail to act, increasing numbers of travelers will avoid O'Hare; and the airlines will schedule more flights via other metropolitan airports, putting additional pressure on a national system approaching its limits. We must decide now to expand runway capacity at O'Hare; and to that end, we pledge our continued support to this Committee, Governor Ryan, and Mayor Daley.