

# Government Advocacy

## USA Today slants coverage to favor airlines

By Chris Dancy

*USA Today* on Thursday published a slanted, one-sided front-page story designed to whip up negative sentiment against general aviation and to perpetuate public misconceptions about GA. NBC's "Today" show did a companion story that also ran on the MSNBC cable news outlet which was equally as negative, although it was somewhat more balanced in its presentation.

“The story is completely devoid of journalistic balance and fails to acknowledge the millions of Americans who benefit from the nation's 5,200 general aviation airports every day,” said AOPA President Craig Fuller.

AOPA's media relations staff learned of the story a week before it was published and had a lengthy conversation with the *USA Today* reporter, but was not included in the article.

The *USA Today* article focuses on spending at GA airports but provides absolutely no perspective. The article does not mention how much Airport Improvement Program (AIP) money is spent at air carrier airports, or that in a typical year, Congress allocates \$3 for air carrier airport improvements to every \$1 to be spent at GA airports.

The *USA Today* article and its companion Today Show piece both entice the audience to equate airline ticket tax income with airport expenditures. Neither story makes any effort to tell the audience that GA operators contribute to the same trust fund through fuel taxes that are five times higher than the airlines', or that the fund also pays for the air traffic control system, of which the airlines are the primary beneficiary.

### **So what are the facts?**

Let's look at 2007, a fairly typical year for AIP funding.

The FAA distributed \$3.34 billion in AIP funds to 2,610 airports.

341 primary airports—airports with more than 100,000 passenger boardings each year—received \$2.1 billion in AIP funds. That's an average of \$6.17 million per airport.

48 commercial service airports—airports with between 2,500 and 100,000 passenger boardings—received \$93 million, or an average of \$1.94 million per airport.

139 GA reliever airports received \$214 million, or an average of \$1.54 million

982 GA airports received \$617 million, or an average of \$628,000.

Combined, the 389 airline airports divvied up \$2,199,335,046, averaging \$5.5 million per airport. The 1,121 GA airports shared \$831,717,227, averaging \$741,942.

An addition, \$310 million was distributed through state block grant programs.

### **Local realities differ from national “perspective”**

On the same day that the two stories ran nationally, a number of local news outlets did their own versions of the story and came to radically different conclusions.

“[Officials defend role of small airports: Facilities open more areas to business world,](#)” reported Nashville’s *The Tennessean* newspaper.

“[Local airports say fed funds put to good use,](#)” said the *Greenville News* of Greenville, S.C.

And, “[Business taking off,](#)” stated *The Record* of Stockton, Calif., simply.

[Two years ago](#), when the Associated Press ran a similarly negative article on federal dollars going to GA airports, the same thing happened: local follow-up stories showed that the money was well spent and benefitted the communities.

“Having convenient access to small airports in communities around the country is as vital to our national transportation system as having highway off-ramps in small towns,” concluded Fuller. “To suggest that smaller airports are not needed is just like suggesting that we should have a road system that connects only the country’s 150 largest cities.

“The truth is that small airports do bring business, jobs, and services—including disaster relief, package delivery, firefighting capability, law enforcement, and emergency medical transportation—to thousands of communities nationwide every day. And that’s good for America.”

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