

## **For Safety's Sake, Keep our Airport Tower Open**

By Ronald Pursuitte

Imagine our Cape Cod roadway system without traffic signals and timing devices or our waterways without navigation rules. The consequences would be chaotic, and travelers would be at risk of life and limb. Now comes the very real threat that the air traffic control tower at Barnstable Municipal Airport and many others nationwide will close this fall, a casualty of the uncertain federal budget process in Washington, D.C. The mind boggles at the absurdity of it and the risk to the 200,000 passengers who fly in and out of the Hyannis facility each year.

Our two main commercial air carriers, Cape Air and Island Airlines, have told us that closure of the tower would severely limit flight operations at times of foul weather and adversely affect their bottom lines.

Earlier, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) threatened to shutter more than half of the nation's so-called contract towers (those—like ours—operated under contract by the Federal Aviation Administration) in the wake of budget sequestration. Wisely, Congress said “no,” recognizing the critical safety benefits of aircraft separation, weather alerts, emergency response and medical flight assistance. But the ban runs out September 30 with the end of the federal fiscal year. And there is little likelihood that Congress will find the time to enact regular legislation to extend it.

We are working diligently with our congressional delegation, Representative Keating and Senators Warren and Markey, to restate Congress's objection to contract tower closure in the one bill that is likely to be enacted this fall: a continuing resolution to maintain current government-wide funding.

People in this region, residents and visitors alike, should be aware of this threat to public safety and add their voices in support of keeping our new \$7 million tower functioning. This must be done without robbing Peter to pay Paul at the DOT. Some of our bureaucratic antagonists in Washington have threatened to divert money from airport capital grants to maintain the towers. That thinking is flawed as a policy and unacceptable to our airport where at least three major environmental and safety projects await federal grant funding.

As we travel, we are not inclined to think of airports as economic engines, but they are. A recent state study found that Barnstable Municipal Airport has a direct economic impact of \$133 million a year on the Cape Cod region. The analysis, by the Aeronautics Division of the Massachusetts DOT, calculated the value of jobs, payroll and business generated by the airport and its tenants along with visitor spending. The study also determined that there is a measurable multiplier of an additional \$95 million a year produced by the recirculation of money spent locally by airport businesses and the people employed here. Overall, the study determined that our airport generates 2,246 jobs, a \$74 million annual payroll and \$227 million a year in direct and indirect benefits.

For all the right reasons, not the least of which is common sense, the federal contract tower support program must continue. Literally, some of our lives and our economic livelihood on Cape Cod may depend on it.

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*Ronald Persuitte of Barnstable Village is chairman of the Barnstable Municipal Airport Commission.*