Tom Madsen Airport Public Transportation Crisis
November 12, 2019

PRESENT CONDITIONS

The Tom Madsen Airport (PADU) consists of an Alaska DOT owned and managed runway and a terminal facility owned and managed by the City of Unalaska. The airport services the business community of Unalaska/Dutch Harbor as well as the year-round residents. The annual landings at PADU average 58,000 commercially ticketed passengers. It services certain air cargo operations and the US mail. Commercial passenger services are provided by one carrier that has authorization and certification to fly only one type of aircraft into PADU. The airport is the only airport for the nation's largest fishing port and is critical to the movement of people for the fisheries and support services. It serves as the airport for local residents and their personal and medical travel. Unalaska/Dutch Harbor is an island, and commercial air travel is the only public transportation available year round. PADU is critical to the throughput of people for private and government business, development, and for health and safety.

The PADU air transportation services are in crisis. In response to a fatal accident October 17, 2019 at PADU all commercial passenger flights to Anchorage have been suspended by the airlines. Realizing the impact a lack of available flights is having on the residents and the business community, the City of Unalaska issued a Declaration of Emergency effective October 29, 2019. The lack of air service is a threat to Unalaska's community health and safety, economy, and educational programs. Unalaska is the largest fishing port in the nation; the interruption threatens the city and Alaska's economy with significant reductions of tax revenue from the fisheries, processing plants, and support services. It is critical for the short and long-term health of the Unalaska community that passenger services stabilize and alternate options are readily available and deployable. The stop gaps presently implemented to keep people moving are not sustainable. Alternate options for air transportation need to be explored and implemented.

PROBLEM STATEMENT
There is no alternative to manage the demand.

PADU is serviced by one passenger air carrier and that carrier has authorization to fly just one type of aircraft at PADU. Disruptions to this single option creates significant risk and costs to the residents and the businesses of Unalaska/Dutch Harbor, as there is no alternate means of passenger travel in or out of Unalaska. The impact of this disruption creates vulnerabilities to the Alaska and US fishing related economies. Alternate solutions are needed in order to protect local residents and business owners, as well as the interests of commerce for the City, the State of Alaska, and the nation's fishing related commerce. In order to maintain the service demands for residents and businesses, Unalaska requires more than one commercial option to move passengers.

SOLUTIONS

It is possible that no one solution is available to prevent a repeat of this crisis in Unalaska. Answers should be explored to assist Unalaska and provide a healthy future for passenger air travel. All of the options considered at this point will require support from State and Federal delegates and agencies.

Short Term

Aircraft Certifications:

The airline should be required to have more than one type of aircraft authorized for passenger travel in and out of PADU. This aircraft would need to be readily available in their fleet and approved for the runaway's parameters.

Essential Air Services (EAS)

Unalaska and Alaska Department of Transportation (ADOT) officials should review the city's eligibility for the EAS program. Though many Alaskan communities rely on air transportation for connectivity to Anchorage, the PADU situation is unique because it is 800 miles from Anchorage and is the largest fishing port in the USA. In December 2018, there were 174 EAS communities in the U.S., 42 are in Alaska (24%). It is currently not known why Unalaska has not been an EAS community since 1998.[1]

Alternative Essential Air Service (AEAS) The AEAS program provides money directly to the local community for charter operations. Currently eight communities in the lower 48 are AEAS yet all have access to the highway system. Unalaska is not connected to the highway system.[2]

Obligations

Unalaska and ADOT should assess USDOT's mandated obligations to provide/ensure access in/out of communities. Do exceptions exist for communities not on a mainland street system? PADU's present scenario of a one plane service/one airline airport makes PADU vulnerable to health, economic and education crisis.

Long Term

Implementation of Runway enhancements or alternative

The Unalaska Airport Master Plan Update in 2008 identified and predicted annual enplanements to increase from 29,830 in 2006 to 54,731 in 2026. Meeting this demand means overcoming stringent airport design standards that limit PADU including Instrument Approach Procedures, Runway and Configuration, and Daylight Hours. The Runway Orientation and wind coverage limits flights to landing in winds of 13 knots or less; the 6,000' runway requirement for approval of all aircraft is unmet (PADU is 4,100'); and runway requirements for safety areas, object free zones, etc. are all sub-par and constrained by water or mountain land features. The master plan estimated the cost to improve PADU to a fully functional airport at a range of $140 - $230 million (in 2003 dollars).[3]

Environmental Compliance

Unalaska representatives understand that significant reviews and permitting processes exist related to airport projects. Aside from approving and adding more aircraft to service PADU, we are confident that all required Environmental Reviews will reveal no feasible alternatives exist on the island other than to improve the Tom Madsen Airport runway and facilities and are prepared to provide assistance throughout all required federal and state regulations.

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[1] Essential Air Service, Congressional Research Service, December 2018
[2] Ibid
[3] Unalaska Airport Master Plan, 2008 CHMD2