
CHAPTER 3

Recommendation: Wyoming Needs A New Approach to Aeronautics.

At present, Wyoming is not positioned to respond proactively to the fluid and constantly evolving aeronautics environment. We recommend the Legislature consider amending statutes to create an entity that will advocate for aeronautics, one intended to be flexible in responding to shifts in air service-related legislation, policy, and funding.

Statutory Changes Needed to Segregate Grant Duties

Other states' volunteer commissions preserve and develop air service.

Neighboring states have demonstrated that bringing about change does not necessarily require large budgets and paid staff. Some states' volunteer boards and commissions have found ways to seek out improved air transportation and, simultaneously, to promote economic development. Because Wyoming's Aeronautics Commission has not moved in these directions, the Legislature should consider separating the Commission's functions, assigning them to the government entities most likely to foster their development.

Air service promotion and airport infrastructure grants should be separated.

We recommend the Legislature consider transferring responsibility for airport infrastructure grants to the Transportation Commission and air travel promotion grants to the Wyoming Business Council. Also, we suggest several options for assigning responsibility for developing stronger air service.

The Legislature should consider transferring authority for airport infrastructure grants to the Transportation Commission.

WYDOT's Transportation Commission can effectively carry out the Aeronautics Commission's current work of disbursing state grants for airport infrastructure and planning. With

Transportation Commission is prepared to make airport infrastructure grants.

consolidation of aeronautics and highways under WYDOT's intermodal approach, the Transportation Commission is prepared to disburse funds for construction contracts for both highways and airports. Keeping airport runways well-maintained adds economic value, as does keeping highways well-paved.

Airport operators are less opposed to merging Transportation and Aeronautics Commissions.

The Aeronautics Commission's grant selection process is largely formula-driven, with Division staff already doing much of the grant review and ranking. Further, the Aeronautics Division Administrator and her staff regularly report to the WYDOT Director and Transportation Commission, as well as to the Aeronautics Commission.

In the past, the Wyoming Airport Operators' Association (WAOA) has strongly opposed such a move, maintaining that airports would be shortchanged without a separate commission focused on aviation funding. Our interviews with a number of general aviation and commercial airport operators suggest this opposition may be softening, due to growing recognition of the additional funding WYDOT dedicates to Commission projects.

The Business Council can use promotion grants to help communities attract tourists and business travelers.

The Legislature should consider making air service advocacy a state government responsibility.

Once the Legislature transfers responsibility for approving infrastructure and planning grants to the Transportation Commission, it can select from several options to handle air service. For example, statutes could direct that the Aeronautics Commission become an air transportation advocacy group, or that the Transportation Commission make air service one of its top priorities.

Air service shortfalls impact public and private partners in economic and community development.

However, we believe the Wyoming Business Council is best positioned to promote commercial and general aviation air service in Wyoming communities. The Business Council can also be responsible for disbursing state funding for air service promotion. Commercial airports, almost exclusively, have applied for Aeronautics Commission promotions grants; general aviation airports need to be encouraged to spend money promoting themselves. Further, the lodging tax presents another potential source of air service promotion funding in areas of the

state where that tax is levied. W.S. 39-15-211 states that these dollars can be expended "for travel and tourism promotion."

Regardless of who becomes the new focal point for air service, participants in the deliberations should include representation from chambers of commerce, travel agents, the Governor's Office, legislators, the Transportation Commission and Aeronautics Division, the Wyoming Associations of Municipalities and County Officials, and the WAOA. The purpose should be to advance:

- direct and regular communication with airlines regarding improved air service in Wyoming
- community involvement in educating consumers to fly locally, promoting the availability of flying lessons and the potential employment opportunities for pilots
- the importance of general aviation
- awareness at the federal level of the need to continue funding for rural air service
- the potential for attracting new and expanding businesses that use aircraft to transport cargo and passengers
- "best practices" air service and airport promotion programs that can be tested in Wyoming and funded with airport promotion and lodging tax grants.

Conclusion

Well-maintained airports are not enough.

Wyoming residents want air service they can count on, and that they perceive as being affordable. Lacking that, they will continue to drive to hubs in other states and spend money there on food, gas, and parking. Economic development proponents believe air service, in addition to well-maintained airports, will encourage tourism and new business.

Designated leadership is needed to coordinate efforts to improve air service.

Wyoming needs flexibility, focus, and leadership to develop better air service and respond to repercussions of future federal funding and policy shifts. While the Aeronautics Commission has served the state well and has kept airport managers connected to state government, its focus has been project- and transaction-oriented. The Legislature should consider changing

the purpose and duties of the Commission, or it should designate another entity to take on the larger role of promoting air service.

***Changes in state law
can end debate and
clarify agencies'
aeronautics-related
duties.***

Regardless of what solution the Legislature selects, Wyoming statutes pertaining to aviation need to be updated. Clear statutory direction that assigns responsibility, authority, and resources to specific agencies, can put an end to the contentious debate about the Aeronautics Commission's value. Without a breakthrough of this sort, we believe there is little prospect for coordinated and targeted state-level action on behalf of aviation.