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Flight imperatives

CONGRESS SHOULD ADDRESS AIR TRAFFIC NEEDS IN THE STIMULUS BILL

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By STEVEN OZUNA

As President-elect Barack Obama prepares to take office and a new Congress begins its work, there is a great deal at stake for Inland region businesses. As part of a national economic stimulus plan, both Obama and congressional leaders have pointed to "shovel-ready" road and bridge projects. These types of projects, since before the New Deal, have been an effective way to create jobs and stimulate growth. However, if this job-creation plan is to provide real economic relief, it must look to the sky.

California has almost 1,000 public and private airports, second in the nation only to Texas. Many of these airports are in the Inland region, where they provide us with an array of vital capabilities. Beyond supporting the movement of people and cargo, local airports represent a web of economic growth and innovation that creates and sustains jobs. Behind every airport there are thousands of workers and companies that equip, maintain and improve our aircraft and airfields. In fact, aviation creates more than 10 million jobs and \$1.2 trillion in economic activity every year.

Despite the number of airports in our area, anyone who has travelled on a commercial airline in the past two years can testify that the traditional "hub-and-spoke" system is clearly not working. The primary reason we experience so many flight delays is that like many of those bridges in need of repair, our air traffic control system, which uses 1950s-era ground-based technology, is outdated and unable to efficiently handle the present volume of air traffic.

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Greg Vojtko / The Press-Enterprise

Travelers weave through at Ontario International Airport in October. Beyond supporting the movement of people and cargo, Inland airports represent a web of economic growth and innovation that creates and sustains jobs.

Safer Aviation

For several years, aviation leaders and the Federal Aviation Administration have called for the implementation of a "Next Generation Air Transportation System" for air traffic control. This safer and more efficient system would run on the same principles as satellite-based GPS devices used in cars. "Next Gen" will reduce congestion and modernize air traffic control by allowing planes to be positioned more closely to each other during takeoffs and landings. It will also integrate and standardize how electronic systems function at an airfield.

In addition to making air travel easier, the process of upgrading to this new system will create a significant number of new jobs for our area. "Next Gen" will provide opportunities to scores of California companies of all sizes. However, congressional funding for "Next Gen" is still stuck on the tarmac, and the FAA has been operating under a series of short-term extensions.

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Funding for an air traffic control system upgrade will mean the difference between success and failure for many Southern California businesses.

Last year, the U.S. House passed a "Next Gen" FAA funding bill by a wide margin, and after intense negotiations the Senate reached a compromise. Unfortunately, the Senate was not able to pass this important measure before time ran out. Rather than starting this process over, or passing another extension which creates no new funding, the next Congress should include this compromise funding mechanism in the new stimulus package immediately.

If the funding is secured, "Next Gen" will take up to 20 years to fully implement. The federal government should also work with innovative companies to deploy interim solutions. These applications would include new light-emitting diode navigational lighting systems that save millions in energy costs. Unfortunately, despite the admirable efforts of our local members such as Reps. Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands; Lucille Roybal-Allard, D-Los Angeles; David Dreier, R-San Dimas; and others, funding for these projects has also been delayed.

Obvious tools

Our company, started by my father 43 years ago in our garage, has provided good, high-paying jobs to our area for decades. As our leaders debate new ways to stimulate growth, they should not lose sight of the tools and means right in front of them. "Next Gen" funding and overdue appropriations for our region's airports should be cleared for takeoff. Achieving this will likely be the difference between success, survival or failure for many Southern California businesses throughout the next year.

Steven Ozuna is a resident of Claremont and owner and president of a company that specializes in avionics navigational aids, airfield lighting and control.