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April 1, 2013

The Honorable Ray LaHood
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary LaHood:

I disapprove of your decision to effectively end the Contract Tower Program (CTP). As part of the its sequester implementation plan, the Department of Transportation (DOT) is closing 149 contract towers, including all 8 towers in Wisconsin.

The CTP is one of the most cost effective programs the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) administers. The Clinton Administration's National Performance Review endorsed the CTP as an effective means of reinventing government services. The DOT Office of the Inspector General (OIG) has conducted several reviews of the CTP and has found that contract towers provide air traffic control services at an average cost of $1.5 million less than comparable FAA-staffed towers. The OIG also found that contract towers have lower rates of safety incidents compared to similar FAA towers.

Despite the cost-effectiveness of the CTP, DOT is cutting the CTP by 75 percent. Other FAA programs will be reduced by five percent, if at all. The Government Accountability Office has reported billions of dollars in cost overruns from poor management of FAA programs, including the NextGen program which is more than $4 billion over budget.

I have serious concerns about DOT's decision to cut a program like the CTP that actually saves the government money. I am a huge proponent of less government spending, but the point is and has always been for the government to do more with less. The CTP is an example of a program that does exactly that. It should be replicated, not slashed.

You recently voiced understanding about the importance of contract towers, saying "We heard from communities across the country about the importance of their towers and these were very tough decisions. Unfortunately we are faced with a series of difficult choices that we have to make to reach the required cuts under sequestration."

Rather than make this "very tough decision," I urge DOT to address cost overruns and poor management practices at the FAA rather than cut a cost effective program that is proven to make air travel safer.

I would appreciate a response to the following questions:

- Given your previous support for allowing flexibility with Airport Improvement Program (AIP) grants, would you support legislation to authorize AIP funds to be used for Contract Tower operations?

- Which parties did you hear from during the limited comment period that ended on March 13, 2013?

- Were any of the parties who contacted the DOT supportive of your decision to cut the CTP? If so, which ones?

- It has been reported that the FAA may close federally-staffed towers, pending negotiations with FAA labor unions about the manner in which sequestration cuts will be implemented. Did the FAA offer to negotiate with the contractors who operate the Contract Towers?

- Will the FAA hire additional staff at federally-staffed towers should larger airports see increased air traffic due to tower closures at smaller airports?

- Will the FAA remove air traffic control equipment from Contract Towers? What will the agency do with the equipment if removed?

In addition to answering these questions, please provide my office with any correspondence from relevant stakeholders that contacted the DOT about this issue during the past 90 days.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. I look forward to working with you to ensure the continued viability of the Contract Tower Program.

Sincerely,

F. JAMES SENSENBRENNER, JR.
Member of Congress