

Legislative Program Review and Investigations Committee

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STUDY SCOPE

Use of Hartford-Brainard Airport's Site

Focus

The study will examine if the state has maximized the economic value of the land upon which Hartford-Brainard Airport sits. The site's value to the host municipality, region and the state will be described, which will include an examination of the site's current use as an airport. Accordingly, the study will assess the airport's operations, governance, and business volume. It will also discuss and explore other uses of the site that have been previously proposed.

Background

The state owns the 201 acres in Hartford's southeast quadrant along the Connecticut River, as well as Hartford-Brainard Airport currently located there. The original site of the airport, first named "Brainard Field" in 1921 and owned by the city of Hartford, was north of its current location. The city acquired additional land for the airport until it encompassed about 351 acres. The state purchased the current site and airport from Hartford in 1959 when the Hartford city council voted for closure; the remainder of the airport property was developed for industrial/commercial use.

Hartford-Brainard Airport offers charter flights, flight instruction, and private aircraft basing. The airport is also the site of a state postsecondary vocational school of aircraft mechanic instruction and a base for certain State Police operations. Because Hartford-Brainard lacks scheduled commercial service, it is known as a "general aviation" airport.¹ It is one of five state-owned general aviation airports in Connecticut.

Transfer of Hartford-Brainard operations to Rentschler Field in East Hartford – which was privately owned at the time – was discussed among policymakers during the 1980s and early 1990s. The idea was to allow for redevelopment of the airport property, likely for commercial or industrial use. Some believed that redevelopment would best serve the city and region, while

¹ General aviation airports have no scheduled commercial air service. Airports with limited service (involving under 10,000 passengers annually) are referred to as "nonprimary commercial service airports" by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The FAA also distinguishes between those airports and ones that serve to lower the amount of general aviation traffic at major commercial (i.e., primary) airports, which are called "reliever airports." Hartford-Brainard is categorized by the FAA as a reliever airport. The public act establishing the Connecticut Airport Authority (CAA) distinguishes Bradley International Airport from the other CAA-owned and -operated airports by designating the latter "general aviation airports."

others disagreed. Critics pointed to a legislatively-mandated study, completed by a consulting firm in 1989, which found an airport was the “highest and best use” of the site. It seems that stiff opposition from East Hartford town officials, among other interested parties, prevented the proposal from being carried out. In the years since, Rentschler Field became home to a large stadium, so it is no longer a place to which Hartford-Brainard’s operations feasibly could be relocated.

In Connecticut, Hartford-Brainard and the other state-owned airports are operated by a quasi-public agency, the Connecticut Airport Authority (CAA). The CAA was created in 2011, and that year, governance and operations for all the state-owned general aviation airports began transferring from the Connecticut Department of Transportation to the authority.² The airport authority also runs Bradley International Airport, the state’s hub airport in Windsor Locks. CAA does not oversee the five municipal airports (including Tweed-New Haven) or private airports in Connecticut. Airports and airspace, including proposed airport closures, are regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The FAA also distributes grants, some of which legally obligate the recipient airport owner to operate the airport for a certain amount of time after grant receipt.

Areas of Analysis

1. Describe the site’s current use as an airport, including the airport’s:
 - a. History, including discussions on potential closure
 - b. Governance, including the roles of the Connecticut Airport Authority and Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in regulating airport operations
 - c. Finances
 - d. Staffing
 - e. Geography
2. Identify the airport’s current uses, as well as its role, looking at the volume of use in multiple ways, including type of craft, purpose of flight, and flight distance
 - a. Compare the airport’s use to other Connecticut airports, focusing on general aviation airports
3. Discuss the airport’s economic value to the City of Hartford, the region, and the state
 - a. Note other benefits the airport may bring
 - b. Identify the costs of maintaining and operating the airport
4. Explore other uses for the site that have been proposed and the rationale for the proposals, including how the site’s economic value, or its contribution to the host municipality, the region, and the state in other ways, could be enhanced
5. Describe other cases in which closure was pursued for general aviation airports similar to Hartford-Brainard and what resulted

² The transfer from the transportation department to CAA began in 2011 and was completed on July 1, 2013.

Areas Not Under Review

Study staff will not perform an original appraisal of the site on which the Hartford-Brainard airport, or any other airport, is located. Neither will staff econometrically estimate the airport's economic value.