



## Use of Hartford-Brainard Airport's Site

### Background

In July 2015, the program review committee authorized a study (to begin January 2016) to examine whether the value of the Hartford-Brainard Airport land was being maximized. The study was to examine the site's value to Hartford, the region, and the state, including its current use as an airport. In addition, the study was to describe the site's governance, explore previously proposed uses, and review closure attempts at airports similar to Brainard.

The Brainard site is owned by the Connecticut Airport Authority (CAA), along with four other small airports and Bradley International. It is about 200 acres, bordered to the north by a trash-to-energy facility, east by the Connecticut River, and south by a water treatment campus.

Brainard Airport is one of approximately 2,900 smaller airports across the United States called "general aviation airports." These airports have no or limited scheduled flights, excepting services like charters. They host business, recreational, pilot training, and public safety-related flights. Brainard is a reliever airport because it has a relatively high volume of traffic and eases congestion for Bradley International.

To complete this study, program review committee staff, among other activities: interviewed personnel from multiple state and federal agencies, along with Hartford and its surrounding towns; talked with representatives of some Hartford neighborhood associations, groups, and employers, as well as people familiar with Hartford's real estate market; spoke with owners of Brainard-based businesses, schools, and organizations, along with aviation advocates; executed an original survey of Brainard-based aircraft owners; analyzed information from multiple city, state, and federal entities; reviewed and collected information on closure attempts and results for airports similar to Brainard; and toured all of CAA's general aviation airports as well as the trash-to-energy facility adjacent to the site.

### Main Staff Findings

**The airport benefits the city, regional, and state economies, and is valued by a few large Hartford employers.** There are 111 private-sector jobs directly at the airport. The airport's direct economic contribution to the state is estimated at \$43 million annually. Three insurance companies with collectively about 15,000 Connecticut employees said closing the airport would make Hartford a less attractive place for them to do business. Many other companies in the region also depend on Brainard Airport to function.

**At the same time, there are some costs – particularly to Hartford.** The major cost for Hartford is lost tax revenue due to the site's public ownership. The state's FY 15 PILOT for the site (\$478,560) was \$734,400 short of what tax revenue on the land (only) would have been. The estimated state airport subsidy was budgeted at \$553,402 for FY 16. Most airport construction projects are paid mainly by the federal government.

**Airport closure – a necessary component of site redevelopment – would be extremely difficult and likely costly.** There are potentially four ways to close an airport in Brainard's position:

1. wait out the airport's obligation to remain open until 2035 – which might not even be possible;
2. apply for closure approval from the relevant federal agency;
3. secure passage of federal legislation; or
4. destroy runways without notice.

Applying for approval is the established process and potentially quickest, but success is highly unlikely because Brainard's situation does not clearly meet any of the approval criteria.

**Redevelopment would demand large public subsidies, and given current fiscal situations, should be approached with caution.** Airport closure, environmental remediation, and infrastructure construction would require significant public funds, and probably take 10 to 20 years. Mixed use redevelopment does not appear feasible due to the site's location and current demand for housing as well as office space. Warehousing and distribution would be the most likely site reuse; however, those jobs are typically low-paying.

### PRI Staff Recommendations

**Given present and foreseeable circumstances, PRI staff recommends the site continue to host an operating airport.**

**Steps should be taken to maximize the airport's value.** CAA and the airport's operator, both relatively new to Brainard, have plans to increase this value. This report makes recommendations to support and complement those plans. In addition, the report encourages: the state to increase the PILOT for CAA general aviation airports; the aviation mechanic school to expand and recruit students from Hartford; and Hartford to request an Airport Development Zone.

**Regardless of whether these recommendations are followed, a path should be chosen quickly.** Uncertainty over the site's future has inhibited further private investment in the airport.