SWAPA
SOUTHWEST AIRLINES PILOTS ASSOCIATION

PRESS RELEASE

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The Time for Politicizing FAA Modernization is Over

(DALLAS) — *OP-ed by Captain Jody Reven, President, Southwest Airlines Pilots Assn.*
On Friday afternoon, radar and communications became unstable at air traffic control facilities across the country, and the nation's airspace came to a stop. Thousands of flights were delayed or canceled. Pilots sat on taxiways and at gates. Controllers worked the problem with the tools they had. Travelers were stuck again, just weeks before the holidays.

By the next morning, Washington had moved on to its favorite part: assigning blame. One side wanted to talk about money not yet spent. The other wanted to talk about decades of neglect. Both have a point. Neither point lands a single airplane.
The time for politicizing FAA modernization is over.

Southwest pilots know exactly what happens when a critical system is allowed to age past its breaking point. In December 2022, our airline's crew scheduling technology collapsed during a winter storm. More than 16,000 flights were canceled, and some two million customers were stranded over the holidays. Despite our pilots being in position to fly, many of us sat on hold for hours, unable to communicate with scheduling, while software systems could not match crews to airplanes.

We had warned for years that the technology could not keep up. It worked until the day it didn't, and then it failed all at once. The lesson was expensive and it was public: you cannot patch your way out of an outdated system. Eventually you have to replace it, and waiting only raises the price.

The national airspace system is in the same position our scheduling system was in, with far higher stakes. Controllers are still managing traffic with radar designed decades ago, paper flight strips, and copper telecommunications lines. Every day, they and the pilots

they work with make the system safe through skill and discipline. But skill should not have to make up for equipment that is past its service life.

For pilots and controllers, technology is not a luxury. It is the set of tools we use to do our jobs safely: reliable radar, clear communications, and accurate surface awareness on crowded airfields. When those tools fail, the system's safety margins shrink, and the people in the cockpit and the tower absorb the difference.

Safety is SWAPA's number-one priority. It always has been. And the traveling public's trust in aviation rests on the same foundation. Passengers board our airplanes believing the system behind us works. Every outage and nationwide ground stop erodes that trust a little more.

Modernization is also being slowed by something entirely within Congress's control: the way we fund the FAA.

SWAPA has long opposed government shutdowns. Last fall's 43-day shutdown, the longest in American history, forced air traffic controllers and safety technicians to work without pay. As the strain built, the FAA had to cut flights at major airports. Shutdowns also halt work on modernization programs, freeze progress on new equipment, and leave the workforce wondering whether the next paycheck will come.

Continuing resolutions do quieter damage. A CR keeps the lights on, but it generally bars agencies from starting new programs or making long-term commitments. That is exactly what modernization requires. You cannot replace a national radar network or rebuild a telecommunications backbone in 90-day increments. Year after year of stopgap funding has added to the delays travelers now feel. Today the FAA is again operating under a CR that expires December 11, with another funding deadline arriving just as holiday travel peaks.

The fix is straightforward. Congress should take the FAA off the shutdown table for good. The bipartisan Aviation Funding Solvency Act, introduced by Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Sam Graves and Ranking Member Rick Larsen, would let the FAA keep paying its workforce and running safety-critical operations during a funding lapse. It deserves a vote. Beyond that, the agency needs stable, predictable funding so it can plan and carry out modernization on a real schedule instead of a political one.

None of this should be partisan, and historically it hasn't been. Congress came together last year to provide $12.5 billion to begin rebuilding the air traffic control system.

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Republicans and Democrats on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee are co-sponsoring legislation to protect the FAA from shutdowns. Safety and modernization have never belonged to one party.

Congress should ask hard questions about how every dollar is spent. Accountability and investment are not opposites; a modernization program this large needs both. But oversight cannot become a reason to stall, and urgency cannot become a reason to skip the details. The two sides need to sit down, agree on what the next phase costs and what it buys, and fund it.

The pilots of Southwest Airlines have lived through what happens when critical technology is left to fail. We do not want to watch it happen to the national airspace system. The time to act is now: before the next outage, before the next shutdown, and before the next holiday season leaves millions of travelers stranded.

About SWAPA

Located in Dallas, Texas, the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association (SWAPA) is a non-profit employee organization representing the more than 12,000 pilots of Southwest Airlines. SWAPA works to provide a secure and rewarding career for Southwest pilots and their families through negotiating contracts, defending contractual rights, and actively promoting professionalism and safety. For more information on the Southwest Airlines Pilots Association, visit www.swapa.org.

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