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A Chicago Tribune Web log for letters to the editor

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Originally posted: December 30, 2005

## Ensuring safe operations at Midway Airport

The Chicago Department of Aviation extends its deepest sympathies to the Woods family and to all those involved in the accident that occurred at Midway International Airport on Dec. 8. The entire city shares in their sadness.

We are determined to fully understand how and why this accident occurred. Midway's travelers, neighbors and aviation professionals must have confidence in the safety of the airport.

Given the tragic nature of this accident, we would all like to have quick answers, but that is not the nature of aircraft accident investigations. The National Transportation Safety Board has said that it may take a year or more to complete its investigation. There has been some preliminary information, but no immediate actions have been recommended by the NTSB or the Federal Aviation Administration.

What we do know is that over the last 30 years, there have been more than 7.5 million safe and successful aircraft operations at Midway. In its design and operation, Midway has strictly complied with all federal requirements to ensure safe operations. For the past nine consecutive years, Midway has achieved a perfect score on its FAA annual certification inspections for airfield maintenance, emergency response capabilities and snow-removal operations—even as the airport has expanded and grown.

The FAA has never asked the Department of Aviation to extend runways at Midway. Its September 2000 report, as well as a later one conducted by the city, acknowledged that available technologies like soft concrete arrestor beds (known as EMAS, engineered material arresting system) were not "practicable" or feasible.

We have been working diligently, however, with the FAA since 2000 to make safety improvements at the airport. We have mitigated obstructions in the runway safety area by removing trees and by relocating signs, light poles and FAA equipment. We are also preparing to relocate a taxiway to enhance safe aircraft movements.

According to the FAA's own standards, however, Midway's airfield layout will not allow a standard EMAS installation. We will continue to work with the FAA to evaluate the potential installation of EMAS at Midway as well as other alternatives to enhance safety.

Midway is one of approximately 300 of the nation's 450 commercial airports that will be affected by new federal legislation regarding runway protection areas by 2015. As it has in the past, we believe that the aviation industry will respond to the congressional mandate with new technology solutions.

It is not realistic to attempt to address this challenge at Midway by acquiring property to expand the airport's footprint. U.S. airports are encouraged by the FAA to control as much property within their airport's Runway Protection Zone as possible. Accordingly the city has acquired certain properties around Midway to keep the area as free as possible from tall buildings and other obstructions.

We have no plans to undertake a massive land acquisition and disrupt the vibrant and dynamic community around Midway. To the extent that we can acquire individual parcels, we will.

But unlike O'Hare International Airport, Midway executed its modernization program in the 1990s and is not attempting to increase its capacity or address chronic delays, as Midway does not significantly impact the entire national air transportation system.

Rather, we will continue to work with the FAA to research and evaluate every conceivable option and take whatever steps are necessary to ensure the safety of the airport. A vibrant Midway Airport is essential to our region's economy and there can be no question about its safety.

Erin O'Donnell

Managing deputy commissioner

Midway International Airport, Chicago

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#### Comments

All comments are subject to editing and not all submissions will be posted. If posted, readers' e-mail addresses will be available to the public. Comments may be considered for publication in the print version of Voice of the people.

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