

Video clips validating Aspen Fly Right's claims about CRJ700 life and FAA policy

Amory B. Lovins, President, Aspen Fly Right, 30 March 2023

How long can Aspen's current CRJ700 regional jets keep flying?

County Staff and their allies often claim that the CRJ700 (the sole commercial aircraft now serving Aspen, operated by SkyWest for United, American, and Delta Airlines) is imminently retiring because it's becoming too old and reliable to keep operating for more than another 2–7 years. That view is incorrect, as documented in Aspen Fly Right's 5 Jan 2023 [Essay #4](#), "The airlines' planes aren't vanishing". One striking confirmation is a videorecorded remark by William Flock, Director of Pitkin County consultant Jacobsen | Daniels and leader of its 1993 Aviation Forecast and Fleet Mix Study for the County. On 19 October 2022, Mr. Flock joined a videoconference to hear and discuss Amory Lovins's invited 80-minute [technical brief](#) "The clean-aviation revolution and Aspen Airport's evolution" (elaborated 12 January 2023 in [Essay #5](#), "Flight Without Fossil Fuel"). Also on the video call were Mr. Flock's colleagues Brad Jacobsen and Abe Oommen, and Aspen / Pitkin County Airport Director Dan Bartholomew. The video recording of the whole 2-hour-56-minute conversation is kept by Pitkin County and not posted, but the County kindly provided a copy to Lovins. Since there was no understanding of confidentiality, and the other participants on the call are all paid by County taxpayers, Lovins thought it appropriate to extract, transcribe, and share this short videoclip at 2:34. [FlockCRJ700](#)

After emphasizing the public importance of "the CRJ700 issue," Mr. Flock says:

I, I think everyone on this, everyone on this call here agrees that the CR, CRJ700 is going to be flying for the next 20 or 30 years, that it's not going away.

Mr. Jacobsen subsequently interpreted this as saying that this aircraft *could* fly for that long but not that it necessarily *would*, because that depends on operators' choices. This is true, but it's not what Mr. Flock said, and what he said does flatly contradict the County's narrative since ~2013, including a 2013 BOCC brief co-presented by County Manager Jon Peacock (reprinted on p 5 of [Essay #4](#)) predicting that the CRJ700 fleet would start to retire by 2018 and be all retired by 2024–25. Lovins's efforts to resolve Mr. Flock's and County officials' or advisors' views by public discussion were unsuccessful, and County officials still claim that this aircraft is "aging out," but further rebuttals have lately included a thorough 2023 Aspen Journalism [investigation](#) and the forecasters' footnote 6 (p 59) in their own Forecast, quoting the aircraft's maker.

This issue matters because the County's airport expansion policy since ~2013, and the County-controlled briefs that exclusively informed the ASE Vision public process, rested on two premises: the CRJ700 regional jets would soon retire, and no suitable replacement regional jet was available, so to preserve commercial air service, the airfield must be redesigned to accept planes bigger than regional jets. Both those premises are now known to be false:

- In March 2024, all the CRJ700s are still flying, though they were all supposed to have retired by now (starting in 2018) based on an erroneous 2013 forecast of 15–17-year operating life rather than the many decades now expected as established above; and

- Since at least 2012, the Embraer E175LR-EWT had been rejected—including in the ASE Vision process that informed the BOCC—as not “ASE performance capable*.” This left no regional-jet alternative to the CRJ700 and therefore a need for bigger mainline planes. But 13 months after the BOCC chose to pursue those supposedly essential bigger planes because no replacement regional jet was available, the E175LR-EWT was resurrected, announced in early 2022 as the CRJ700’s replacement, and put into the 2023 Forecast.

Yet County policy continues as if its long-stated two-part rationale hadn’t just vanished—creating the appearance of a bait-and-switch that has gone almost unnoticed. No other policy was or is being publicly considered. A weak alternative rationale based on environmental impacts is now claimed, but the official plan actually flunks every environmental criterion set for it, while the AAB is still being falsely told that it meets them all—a claim of unknown origin.

Can we choose whether to take bigger planes, or will the FAA make us?

Does the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) require our Airport to rebuild the airfield to accept bigger planes with up to 118’ wingspans (“full ADG(III)”), rather than the current exceptional, equally safe 95’ limit authorized by an FAA Modification of Standard (MoS)?[†]

In a 2.8-hour public Special Meeting with the Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) and the Airport Advisory Board (AAB) on 11 April 2023, Lovins twice asked FAA regional director John Bauer a vital question that no officials had asked in the first two hours. Mr. Bauer twice responded that *the County can choose to keep its nonstandard layout, MoS, and wingspan limit, on pain of losing future discretionary FAA grants*. The video of the entire meeting at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d2Sp9S8RRIM> lets viewers verify content and context for the following videoclips. They and their transcripts follow, capturing the most relevant parts of Lovins’s two public-comment question periods, which start at 2:19.20 and 2:49.18. Unfortunately, these clips have noisier audio than the full-length original—the County’s video-posting system does not seem to allow clips or downloads, requiring successive software workarounds—but they can be followed satisfactorily with the help of the transcripts below.

Lovins’s **first question period** (2:19.44–2:24.03) opens with this discussion. Its full recording, and red-highlighted short videoclips of the highlighted parts, are hyperlinked below for readers’ convenience:

Lovins: Who is asking for bigger planes—is it the County or the FAA? **And if the County did not ask for bigger planes, could the airport keep its 95-foot limit, the MoS, remain eligible to compete for grants, and keep the grants we already got (excepting perhaps any that were specifically to go to full ADG(III) that we then weren’t going to do Bauer|LovinsQ**
 Bauer: So it’s a—I mean, the County has to answer the part about whether they were asking[‡], because quite honestly, that’s what—we forced the County’s hand, back in 2012-ish, 2013,

* ASE Air Service Planning Study 2013, p 11, and 2014, Exec Sum p 1 & p 7, continued in ASE Vision Technical Working Group Report, 2020, p 23: no acceptable procedures yet for safe and reliable year-round operation; Exh A p 2: “marginal” for summer missed-approach capability.

† That limit is enforced by an FAA-approved Ordinance to comply with the FAA’s Modification of Standard [MoS] that governs Aspen / Pitkin County Airport, allowing its separation between the center of the runway and the center of the taxiway to be 320’ rather than the standard 400’. Its history is described [here](#). How the FAA found 320’ to be as safe with 95’ wingspans as 400’ separation is with 118’ wingspans is in App. A [here](#).

‡ The history of County choices and actions to which the FAA was responding, though sometimes obscured, is clear: see our [Essay #4](#) at pp 4ff. However, the push for bigger planes goes back decades, including voters’ 3:2 rejection in 1995. The driving forces are often shifting and murky.

when we started talking about not approving a Mod[ification of Standard] for 320 feet on the west side. And I think a light bulb went off with folks at that point of “Oh, my goodness! What, what just happened?” So then that facilitated a lot of conversation about the future of air service at Aspen. And that was largely driven by our comments about *not* allowing a mod on the west side, drove that conversation [in] which the County then undertook the three studies that are on the airport’s website, and analyzed what the future of air traffic or, or air service looked like at Aspen.

Then *that* resulted in us [the FAA] saying, OK, how do we get full Design Group III [ADG(III)] standards [allowing up to 118’ wingspans]? So that genie’s kinda out of the bottle, right? It’s hard to get that back in the box. So now the Agency knows you can meet full Group III standards, there is a way forward, where before I think there was a lot of question about whether that was going to be able to happen or not. So you can’t really go back and say, ‘Well, we just want to be treated like we were ten years ago,’ because there’s been a lot of data that have come out since then. [Bauer1Access](#)

So, could you keep it the 95-foot wingspan restriction? Absolutely, but I think I’ve been fairly clear that we would probably at that point limit your funding to, uh, entitlement funding or rehabilitation funding for rehabilitation purposes. So that’s kind of where we put that stake in the ground at this point. [Bauer1Tight](#)

Viewers may view this entire 5½ -minute Lovins/Bauer first question period to ensure it’s in proper context, via this longer clip starting at 2:19.37. [Bauer1complete](#)

Then at 2:22.10–2:24.05, after other topics not relevant here, Lovins asked:

Lovins: And the, the reason I asked where the initiative came from to bring in bigger planes is that in 2018, you wrote that “the County *came to us*,” to the Agency—

Bauer: And that’s correct.

Lovins: —asking for that.

Bauer: That’s correct—

Lovins: OK. So I’m trying—

Bauer: —*but*, but caused by, so we’re clear, right?—we caused that thinking to start, because we said no more mods for 320 feet on the west side, and that was when they came to us with a full-length taxiway on the west side, and we said no.

Lovins: I think some would say that actually it was some years before that that the County was pushing for bigger planes. But I don’t want to argue about the history. But what I want to get clear is, uh, when you have made so clear today that you are pushing for 400-foot separation [between runway and taxiway centerlines], is that to any degree contingent on whether the County still wants bigger planes?....”

That question got sidetracked by another topic (aviation innovation) and was not answered. However, Mr. Bauer later answered it clearly and emphatically when re-asked in Lovins’s **second question period** (2:40.10–2:43.48), starting at 2:42.51: [Bauer2Choice](#)

Lovins: What you said before is that the Agency [FAA] is not saying it’s going to take away the, uh, Modification of Standard on the separation [between runway and taxiway]—

Bauer: We’re not.

Lovins: Does it—OK, that’s good to hear. So that if the County decided that it wanted to wait, and not, uh, go straightaway for bigger than 95 foot [wingspan], less than 118 [foot], airplanes, we could keep what we’ve got and continue the MoS. Is that correct?

Bauer: Yes, but there’s caveats there, right? I mean, we talked about it. We’re not going to provide anything other than your entitlement grants. So we—yeah, those are all decisions that are the County’s decision to make.

Lovins: I think you've just made an ironclad case for the idea to keep control of the FBO, use the resulting revenues to build the—
AAB Chair Jacquie Francis: [breaking in]
Lovins —terminal itself,—
Francis: Yeah, I, I think we [cutting Lovins off, so he gets up and returns to his audience seat]—I think that's not really what was said⁸, but anyway, I'll go to Auden [Schendler, AAB member].

Importantly, Mr. Bauer's clear statement that the choice to keep the existing airfield layout, 95-foot wingspan limit, and Modification of Standard, on pain of losing FAA discretionary grants, "are all decisions that are the County's decision to make" flatly contradicts statements by County staff and consultants—most recently by Brad Jacobsen to the AAB on 21 March 2024—that such a County choice is "impossible." The FAA, he claimed, would not approve an Airport Layout Plan that didn't let in bigger planes (but is required before rebuilding the runway in any location), because that would not achieve a technically feasible increase in "access"—how many planes and kinds of planes can ultimately use the airport. But clearly Mr. Bauer knew of this sacrifice of potential access, because he had just described it in the aqua-highlighted quotation and video clip above—*yet he still said the County can choose to keep its present layout*. Because the FAA now knows that accepting bigger planes would be technically feasible, that County choice would incur a penalty—losing future discretionary grants—but the choice is not impossible; *it's a specific offer, twice repeated*. And since Mr. Bauer says the FAA will *not* revoke the existing MoS, that's further evidence that claims of an immutable FAA mandate for bigger planes are incorrect. He confirms that, at the cost of lost grants, the County *can* choose to keep its MoS.

Thus the record contradicts official statements that the FAA would never allow this outcome so there's no point asking. Aspen Fly Right thinks Mr. Bauer is a man of his word and his assurances to the BOCC reflect his Agency's policy. Just before the inset transcript above, he states at 2:41:47:

The Agency hasn't flip-flopped on this. We've been very consistent...for almost, at this point, 12 years?...I'm just laying out for you: This is the Agency's position. How you choose to answer your questions at your airport *are* your issues, but this is where the Agency lies.

Expecting the FAA's consistent position for the previous 12 years has remained consistent in the fewer than 12 months since he said all that (11 April 2023), the BOCC should accept his offer. That's all the more true now that the FAA grants the County would then lose turn out to be *unnecessary* for building the better airport that the community wants and needs, as shown in our 21 March 2024 financial [summary](#) and [analysis](#). For wise decisions, community harmony, and good government, a worthy first step would be for our elected officials to consider the previously excluded real alternative of not redesigning for bigger planes. Our financial analysis reveals that this choice incurs no significant financial penalty—but it clearly offers many advantages worth exploring.

As always, all comments and specific corrections are warmly welcome at info@aspenflyright.org.

⁸ Jacquie Francis presumably misheard. The statement that she suggests is inaccurate was not a paraphrase of Bauer's remarks, but simply Lovins's conclusion from what Bauer had just said. The officials presiding at this meeting tried to keep the FBO and its revenues out of bounds.