

**Article submitted to the OPED Editor of the New York Times  
Thursday, December 06, 2007**

Frans C. Verhagen

**THE COMPTROLLER'S TAKE ON AIRPORT CONGESTION**

When asked two days ago by a Queens Chronicle reporter whether I supported New York City Controller William Thompson's report on airport delays I replied Yes and No. Very briefly I explained to him the positive and negative aspects of "Grounded: The Impact of Mounting Flight Delays on New York City's Economy and Environment." Here is an extended answer to that question looking at its positive aspects and its shortcomings.

The following three remarks deal with the positive aspects of this policy report.

First, congratulations are in place because his office of policy management is the first and, probably, the only one among the mayoral agencies that have seriously looked at one of the main problems in the three metropolitan airports. His analysis and recommendations are more profound than that of the Deputy Mayor Daniel Doctoroff who, at a conference at NYU in June of this year, ventured to consider the traffic on the Van Wyck expressway as the most pressing problem in his "research" on the future of regional aviation. No such report was ever published by the Port Authority, if it was ever done at all. The Mayor's Aviation Board and the Queens Borough President's Aviation Advisory Council are also not given to proactive action in matters aviation. Thus, Mr. Thompson stands out as a leader in this area, challenging other mayoral candidates to deal with this important industry in terms of its economic, social, health and ecological impacts.

Secondly, taking into account that as controller Mr. Thompson has foremost to investigate the economic dimension of the metro NY airport congestion and its resulting delays, using detailed statistics for the local situation and comparing them with national ones, he surprisingly did a good impact study of the additional emissions caused by these extraordinary delays.

Thirdly, his recommendations—limited as they are on account of short-term and local planning focus-- are well-taken. One of his technological recommendations deals with the NextGen technology. It is a technical revolution

in air traffic control, which is touted to be the best long-term fix in not only transforming the nation's aging air traffic control operation by the introduction of a state-of-the-art satellite navigation system, but also in solving the aviation industry's other problems. He also recommends greater emphasis on rail for short-haul distances without specifying the various changes that have to take place to make an efficient regional rail network available, particularly by making the proposed Moynihan Station redevelopment a "hub" for North South and East West thru rail traffic. His office of transportation management might contacted the regional rail working group ([www.rrwg.org](http://www.rrwg.org)) that have been dealing with this challenge for over a decade.

While a valiant short-term effort in dealing with short-term problem, that is essentially a long-term problem, this report is to be faulted to be too short-term, ignoring the region's and humanity's major aviation challenges in troubling times of the climate crisis.

The aviation industry as a whole adversely impacts in a very substantial way on the Earth's climate system. Its greenhouse gas emissions contribute presently almost 15% of all emissions and, on account of its expansionistic nature, it is predicted that by 2050 it will almost emit 50% of all GHG emissions. Note that CO<sub>2</sub> and the other GH Gases are emitted in the upper troposphere where their impact is to be multiplied by 2.7 and thus their CO<sub>2</sub> is to be calculated as their CO<sub>2</sub> equivalent or CO<sub>2</sub>e. Emissions of CO<sub>2</sub>e by military jets in the stratosphere have to be multiplied by a factor of 30. While other industries are attempting to do their share to keep the global temperature rise below 2 degree Celsius, the aviation industry is basically not willing and, what is worse, is not able to do its part unless it stops growing and, even, unless it reduces its operations.

Humanity is given a decade or so to stop and reduce global heating. Both business and leisure travelers have to reduce their flying by combining trips, substituting video conferencing for their travel and last but not least not use air transportation for non-emergency short haul trips. Paying carbon offsets only is meaningful if reductions are attempted by both classes of travelers and also by the users of air cargo. Given that a very substantial part of the 91% of imported foods into the US is flown in, this means life style changes where food miles are reduced and local staples are used. Humans, being carnivores and omnivores, have to become locavores!

Having noted the absence of climate change considerations, let alone their urgency, the Report would have benefited if it had been an interagency project. Having an economic focus it should have included the Economic Development

Corporation which is the contracting agency with the Port Authority for the signed 15 year lease. Besides other agencies, it should definitively have included the Mayor's Sustainability Office that developed his NYC2030 sustainability plan. Perhaps, this Report is the beginning of the reassertion of local power over against the bi-state Port Authority, which behaves a state within a state and not with much vision at that. Personally, I believe that both states and particularly New York City would be better served by accountable mayoral agencies that would strongly coordinate their policies and operations in the region. As such greater efforts could be made in aviation demand management by educating the public rather than having a public authority engage in an ever stronger capacity expansion program.

Once greater local control is extracted from the Port Authority and the FAA local government could put greater on the PA to have the landing fees reflect the full costs of its operations, so that parking lots income is not the primary source of revenue. By reducing that parking income the PA will be less opposed is to greater mass transit and rail connections. Why was the "bending" of the suburban commuter rails for access to the three major airports not used and in stead a wholly incompatible Air Train built?

Increased local control could also lead to the auctioning of underutilized slots and congestion pricing, of granting the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation and the NYC Department of Environmental Protection an oversight function of the PA. Perhaps, we should be thinking of having a national Sustainable Aviation Trustee Council (SATCO) that would be given some regulatory functions, once the federal government starts taking step towards the creation of an infrastructure context for a sustainable transportation system. This infrastructure program would integrate aviation into an efficient intermodal transportation system by increased funding of regular and high speed rail, modern coach network, intercity light rail, etc. Given that air transportation is 3-10 more energy intensive, i.e. more polluting than surface transportation, this building of infrastructure is not only ecologically necessary on account of the climate crisis, but it also economically necessary on account of the increasing price of oil that has passed its world peak of production and will soon pass the \$100 mark.

The US citizen sustainable aviation movement has proposed such infrastructure program. It would cost \$300 billion and be spread out over 15 years. This program is called the IITS Initiative where IITS stands for Integrated Intermodal Transportation System. Though ISTEA (The Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act) of 1991 was a huge step forward in (surface) transportation planning and management, aviation was not integrated into this Act. What is needed is legislation that funds both air and surface transportation in one

authorization bill which may be called the Intermodal Surface AND AIR Transportation Efficiency Act or ISATEA. The citizen sustainable aviation movement is circulating an ISATEA Petition for governments, business and civil society to sign which would put pressure on the US Congress to pass such authorization bill in the fall of 2009.

In conclusion, Mr. Thompson is to be admired for inserting his statutory authority in the management of the major local airports. He is, definitely, a leader in this important economic, social and ecological area. Hopefully, in his next (interagency) report he is able to demonstrate his leadership by emphasizing demand management rather than capacity expansion, remembering that, like in the highway building program, the more you supply capacity, the more demand you create. Hopefully, by that time his office of policy management may be structured on the sustainability perspective that permeates Mayor Bloomberg's NYC2030 sustainability plan.

It was William D. Ruckelshaus, the first administrator of the US EPA, who has placed this sustainability perspective which is part of the emerging sustainability revolution in its proper historical context and challenge by comparing it to humanity's two earlier revolutions.

“Can we move nations and people in the direction of sustainability? Such a move would be a modification of society comparable in scale to only two other changes: the Agricultural Revolution of the late Neolithic, and the Industrial Revolution of the past two centuries. These revolutions were gradual, spontaneous, and largely unconscious. This one will have to be a fully conscious operation, guided by the foresight that science can provide. If we actually do it, the undertaking will be absolutely unique in humanity's stay on Earth.”

Frans C. Verhagen, M.Div., M.I.A., Ph.D. is a sustainability sociologist who directs the citizen sustainable aviation movement in the metro New York area ([www.metronyaviation.org](http://www.metronyaviation.org)) and nationally ([www.us-caw.org](http://www.us-caw.org)) and is a principal in the independent sustainable aviation consulting organization, SAVIA Associates International ([www.susaviation.com](http://www.susaviation.com)).