

City of West Torrens - Appearance before Hearing - Mayor Michael Coxon and CEO Terry Buss

Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport

Inquiry into the provision of rescue, firefighting and emergency response at Australian airports

Wednesday 20 March 2019 at 9.30 am - Atura Hotel Adelaide Airport

Dear Senator Sterle (Chair) and Senators;

Thank you for providing the opportunity for the City of West Torrens to appear before this Senate Public Hearing to express our concerns about the possible reduction in Aviation Rescue and Firefighting staffing numbers at Adelaide Airport by Airservices Australia during the curfew period.

Adelaide Airport is the principal airport of Adelaide, South Australia, servicing just over 8.4 million passengers per year. It is located fully within the City of West Torrens and adjacent to the suburbs of West Beach, Lockleys, Brooklyn Park, West Richmond, Netley, North Plympton, and Novar Gardens. West Torrens is home to around 60,000 residents and with Adelaide Airport being only 6 km from the Adelaide CBD, many thousands of airline commuters pass through our City on a daily basis to gain access to and egress from Adelaide Airport.

Adelaide Airport is also the largest single site employment precinct in the State with over 8,700 people working at the airport. Development on the airport site is constantly occurring both airside and non-airside; this hotel we meet in today was opened last September, the airport terminal itself is undergoing a major expansion and the Airport Business District is attracting new businesses like OZ Minerals, Kennards and Australian Clinical Laboratories.

All of this points to increased activity on the site and although there may be an aircraft curfew period in place for Adelaide Airport, it is a 24/7 operation with people on site both day and night.

While my Council supports the operation of the Adelaide Airport Curfew, it also recognises the fact that there are a number of permitted aircraft movements every night and early morning during the curfew period. These movements include several categories being Low Noise Heavy Freight movements; Permitted Jet Movements; Diversions; Emergency, Search and Rescue Movements; and approved Curfew Dispensations.

While most of us present here today understand that the curfew at Adelaide airport only prevents large passenger aircraft from landing and taking off, with some exceptions, freighters, medical air transport and other category aircraft still use the airport during the curfew period, with all 18 aerobridges generally occupied at night with passenger aircraft preparing to depart once the curfew period ends.

In addition, there are airport staff and employees of a number of businesses that continue to operate overnight and a steady flow of early morning passengers which adds to the constant supply of people at the airport during the curfew period.

On average over the past 3 years the number of permitted aircraft movements during the Adelaide Airport Curfew has been 4,160 movements annually equating to 11.4 aircraft movements per curfew period.

This is not an insignificant number of aircraft movements considering the curfew that exists and this coupled with the 24/7 operational nature of the airport site itself, indicates that while there may be lax periods of activity within any 24 hour operating period of the airport, there is always something happening with people, travellers, employees, visitors always present at the airport and critically so during the curfew period.

My Council first became aware of the proposal by Airservices Australia to reduce aviation rescue and firefighting staffing numbers at Adelaide Airport in January this year. At its meeting on 15 January 2019 Council resolved that the CEO write to the Hon Michael McCormack MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Development expressing Council's concern about Airservices' proposed changes to staffing numbers at Adelaide Airport.

Council's main concern was that any reduction in personnel hours to downgrade the emergency response cover could jeopardise the ability of rescue and firefighting personnel to deal with emergencies and security threats at Adelaide Airport. This in turn not only has potential to present a risk to those present and in attendance at the airport itself, it also has potential to present a risk to those members of our community that reside in proximity to the airport.

It is Council's understanding that currently, during the overnight Curfew period (between 11pm and 6am); Adelaide Airport has an Aviation Rescue and Firefighting (ARFF) crew operating 24-7 in accordance with CASA regulations. The airport is safeguarded by a dedicated crew of 5 staff able to deploy one aviation emergency response vehicle within 3 minutes to any point on the airport.

It is also Council's understanding that Airservices is fully funded to continue to maintain existing staffing levels of its ARFF crew but is considering changes all in the name of saving money. Being prudent with public funds is in all our interests however, that endeavor should not take precedent over public safety.

In his response to Council, Minister McCormack stated that:

"I assure you that safety remains the primary focus of Airservices' considerations."

Council on behalf of its community and those persons present at the airport site during the curfew period value this comment from the Minister and trust that Airservices Australia place this primary focus of "safety" front of mind as they review their ARFF staffing profile at Adelaide Airport, well above any cost saving measures.

I personally am not across all the implications of such a cut in ARFF staffing numbers at Adelaide Airport but it is not hard to realise that cuts of the magnitude proposed, around 40%, will not have implications for responses to aircraft incidents on the runways or taxiways, rescue and retrieval efforts during incidents, protection of critical airport infrastructure during an incident, and responses to any high-level security incident on the airport.

Minister McCormack in his response to Council also stated:

"Under Civil Aviation Safety Regulations, there is no requirement to provide any ARFFS coverage outside of the operating hours of passenger aircraft at Adelaide. However, reflecting its commitment to aviation safety, Airservices has elected to provide a Category 5 level of service for many years and current staffing levels are above the minimum required for a Category 5 service."

Once again, and being respectful of the Minister's comments, ARFF staffing levels at Adelaide Airport have been in place for some time so it would appear illogical for Airservices to reduce the current staffing levels as a cost saving measure when at the same time Adelaide Airport is continuing to grow at an exceptional rate in terms of a number of measures including aircraft movements, passenger numbers, freight payloads, and non-airside business development.

To the contrary, and with all the growth occurring at Adelaide Airport, it would appear quite logical to argue for an increase in staffing levels to a higher Category of service, rather than have Airservices reduce staffing levels.

Council is aware that those professional personnel that provide and support the delivery of ARFF services at Adelaide Airport share similar concerns to Council about the proposed reduction in ARFF staffing numbers.

I therefore request that this Senate Hearing take on board the concerns expressed today and form the view that any reduction in ARFF staffing numbers at Adelaide Airport is not warranted or justified and that this Senate Reference Committee send a clear message to Airservices Australia and Minister McCormack that it opposes any such reduction.

Terry Buss PSM - Chief Executive Officer, City of West Torrens

Michael Coxon - Mayor, City of West Torrens