



**U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON
COMMERCE, SCIENCE & TRANSPORTATION**
Senator Maria Cantwell, Chair

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

**Nomination Hearing for Phil Washington to be Administrator of the Federal
Aviation Administration**

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation

March 1, 2023

Opening Statement

VIDEO

CANTWELL: Good morning. The U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation will come to order. This morning we are having a hearing on the nomination of Phil Washington to be Administrator at the Federal Aviation Administration.

Mr. Washington, welcome. Congratulations on your nomination and I know, I think at least one or two of our colleagues want to be here as well to do an introduction. We're very fortunate to have them and we will call on them in a minute.

But as we are expecting the arrival of our Ranking Member, I'm going to go ahead and start my opening statement in hopes that we can keep going this morning.

Today the Commerce Committee is meeting to consider the nomination of Phil Washington to be Administrator of the FAA. The safety mission of the FAA starts at the top with the Administrator and I hope to hear from you, Mr. Washington, about your vision for making sure that the FAA is the gold standard in aviation safety.

Three years ago, Congress spoke clearly on needed reforms in the aircraft certification process and the FAA safety oversight. I worked with my colleague, Senator Wicker, who was the Chair of the Committee at that time on that important legislation.

Today, we need a clear commitment that this legislation will be fully implemented, and that these reforms -- ensuring designee oversight, mandating Safety Management Systems, and holding manufacturers accountable -- are all adhered to.

I want to especially thank the families of the 737 MAX tragedies for their important role in helping us craft and pass this landmark legislation. It is an important reminder that the FAA's leadership mandates extend internationally as well.

The United States must be a strong safety voice at ICAO, we must raise the global safety bar on issues like pilot training and human factors. And the FAA Administrator must also lead a large, complex organization. The safety agency has over 45,000 employees across different lines of business, day in and day out, these workers answer the call and are engaged in the continuous job of safety oversight.

We also need strong leadership at the FAA to continue the FAA reauthorization bill this year. The administration must deal with a myriad of new challenges presented by 21st century technology, Advanced Air Mobility platforms, and manufacturing. We also must build up our National Airspace System, which is already the world's busiest and most complex with next generation technology and operational redundancies.

In addition, the aviation future must be sustainable. That means developing the capacity and infrastructure for sustainable aviation fuel and the meeting our 2050 targets for net zero carbon emissions.

So Mr. Washington, you're here today to explain how you and your leadership can meet that vision and those vital requirements of the FAA. I'm pleased that our colleagues Senator Bennett and Senator Hickenlooper, member of this committee, will be here to also say a few words on your behalf.

But let me just say, you represent a great career that we much appreciate. Mr. Washington is a 24 year veteran of the U.S. Army where he rose to the rank of Command Sergeant Major, the highest noncommissioned officer rank an enlisted soldier can achieve and he would be the first African American confirmed to serve as the FAA administrator.

This would be a landmark achievement, and there has never been an FAA administrator nominee that has come from the enlisted ranks. The U.S. Army taught Mr. Washington how to get things done and get them done right. And indeed, the Department of Defense awarded him the prestigious Defense Superior Service Medal for exceptional service to the country.

And after military retirement in 2000, Mr. Washington joined the Denver Regional District RTD and earned his way to the top of that transit agency with an annual ridership of over 40 million. In Denver, Mr. Washington implemented the nation's first and only 2.2 billion transit public-private partnership, called the Eagle P3 project, on time, and expanding multimodal transit regions, and in 2015, was named CEO of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Authority.

In Los Angeles, H he oversaw a rail and bus network that transports 1.2 million passengers annually and managed a budget of \$9 billion and oversaw 10,000 employees. He was also key and leading an expansion of LA Metro, managing approximately \$20 billion in infrastructure and new rail connections between the Los Angeles International Airport.

Then in 2021, he became CEO of Denver International Airport, the third busiest airport in the world. Now for my Colorado colleagues, I'm not doubting, but I did have to look that up, and sure enough, yes, it's true.

You move a lot of people through that airport. So, he leads 35,000 employees and manages a \$1.3 billion operating budget and under his watch, he set an all-time passenger traffic record, nearly 70 million passengers traveled through its terminals, up about 18 percent over 2021 and surpassing pre-COVID numbers.

So organizations like the American Public Transport Association, Airports Council International, National Business Aviation Administration, and many other organizations, including many labor organizations who also support your nomination.

So, again, congratulations. Thank you for being here and I look forward to having a chance to discuss with you the future of the FAA.

I'll turn to my colleague, the Ranking Member, Senator Cruz, for his opening statement.

Q&A Round 1

VIDEO

CANTWELL: Thank you Mr. Washington.

I'm convinced that as somebody who runs the third largest airport that the issues of the FAA that deal with air traffic controllers, deal with NexGen systems, deal with the integration of new entrants, that you have a very good grasp of those issues. You have to if you're running a large organization like the airport every day.

And my sense is your history of being manager of large organizations with thousands of employees also gives you a very good sense of some of the challenges of moving a big bureaucracy to address the technology issues of today. That is, clearly any organization's challenge today is how do you adapt to innovation and new technology.

But I do want to get you on the record as it relates to the aviation safety bill that I mentioned that Senator Wicker and I passed out of committee after response to the MAX accidents.

And the fact that we feel that industry and FAA got too cozy. That they that they moved away from the designated engineering representative model in which the FAA was really in charge, and somehow confused the people on the ground as to the level of oversight that was required.

Our reforms made sure that those employees who are doing this certification work were directly hired, that they were able to communicate directly with the FAA, and that they were able to be removed from the FAA.

So I want to know, first and foremost, do you support that focus? And will you continue to fight to implement the oversight of an aggressive FAA holding manufacturers accountable for their work in engineering?

WASHINGTON: Senator, thank you for the question. Absolutely, yes.

I think Administrator Dickson and Acting Administrator Nolen have done a great job of sort of foot stomping, that we are the regulator.

I will continue that. I will also continue the implementation of the reform act and look to accelerate the outstanding things that have not been completed. So absolutely, yes.

CANTWELL: One of the things that isn't completed, and I think we may end up having Mr. Nolen back here today to talk about this, just because we want to continue to make progress and he is the safety lead.

The legislation also called for integrated project leadership between NASA, the Air Force and the FAA, to address novel certification, you know, technology that is just emerging.

It's not lost on anybody. Particularly the NTSB, and some of the international organizations.

That the implementation of new technology and human factors is something that we should be paying more attention to.

So what will you do to make sure that this particular mission, this what some of us call gray beards, that the FAA is populated with the right technical aviation expertise? That that counter referencing between NASA and Air Force and others are implemented so that we really do have the best and brightest technology leads as we are going through the certification process?

WASHINGTON: Again, thank you for the question Senator.

I know the FAA has been doing a number of things around recruiting and around making sure that compensation is adequate to bring folks in. I will continue that, my track record of standing up various training facilities and various training programs will allow me to attract great talent into the FAA.

I think it's also important for us to go to every corner of this country looking for talent.

At the Denver International Airport of the Center of Equity and Excellence in Aviation we're doing just that. And my plan would be to scale that up to look for the best talent in this country to bring into FAA.

CANTWELL: And what are your ideas for how to get that done, given that we do have real FAA critical expertise? What are your ideas on how to change this?

WASHINGTON: Well, a couple of things. I was we were talking about my military career. There's something called the Transition Assistance Program in terms of the military. I'm well familiar with those.

These are programs that help soldiers get out of the military. I think that is an incredible source and a resource for great talent. I am tied into those Transition Assistance Programs or TAP programs. I would start there.

I would start in our colleges, I would start in our HBCUs, and I would start in places around the country, to show people a career pathway.

It is one thing to tell a young person get into the aviation industry is quite another thing to show them what that means and show them sort of the cradle to executive leadership pathway. And that is what we have designed in my years in transportation.

CANTWELL: Well, this is going to be one of the very biggest challenges at the FAA, is getting the right talent and getting them there very quickly.

Q&A Round 2/Closing Remarks

VIDEO

CANTWELL: Mr. Washington, one of the things that keeps coming up in this discussion has been this Southwest Airlines outage and the fact that literally thousands of people were stranded over several days without any idea of what was going to happen next.

For me, one of my constituents that seemed to be most prominent was a high school basketball coach and his wife and the kids. They were down in Vegas at a tournament and literally for four days, right around Christmas, had to figure out what to do next. And so every day was a challenge.

They felt like they had it pretty good because they actually went and had a place and had all the kids there and they celebrated Christmas together. So it turned out to be a bonding experience for them, but several times they went back to the airport to find many other people just sleeping on the floor of the airport, trying to figure out what was going to happen next.

So in the hearing that we had on the [Southwest] issue, one of the things that the Southwest pilots brought up is they thought that Southwest had lost operational control.

That meant that the operation of what was the airlines flights, there where the pilots were, where the pilots needed to be, they basically did not know.

And one of the things that the FAA Administrator, if confirmed, can take action against enforcement of the fact that they had loss of control.

So what I'm interested in knowing, I think everybody in this hearing, you're getting a drift here that nobody wants an industry person who's too cozy with industry. People want a new day at the FAA.

And they want the FAA to make sure they're thinking about consumers and as you mentioned, several times safety.

So if confirmed, would you make sure that you took aggressive action on making sure that either fines or their certificates things of that nature were looked at?

In this case, what we're trying to do is get Southwest to own up to the fact that they need to fix this system so that it doesn't happen again. So would you be aggressive on this issue?

WASHINGTON: Yes, I would, Senator.

CANTWELL: Okay. Thank you. That concludes our hearing today. The Senators will have to close a business March 6th to submit questions for the record. The witnesses will have to the close of business March 13th to respond. And that concludes our hearing