

"Bumps in the Road"

J. Randolph Babbitt, Washington, D.C.

Administrator, Federal Aviation Administration

November 4, 2009

International Aviation Club

Remarks as prepared for delivery

Good morning, and thank you, Doug [Lavin], for those kind words and for the invitation. In truth, when the letter came in, it said, "You may address whatever issue is on your plate." Whatever is a pretty big word, so I think I'd like to take the opportunity to talk about — dirt. Now in this town, when a political appointee says publicly that he plans to talk about dirt, people lean forward.

I know what you're thinking, "He's going to give us some real White House scoop." Or "maybe he's going to announce the new deputy administrator." Well, I'll be candid with you. When I say "dirt," I mean real dirt. The wipe-your-feet-on-the-mat kind.

So, what got me to the place where I'm talking about dirt? I enjoy reading off-beat stuff including stuff like scientific attempts to explain everyday phenomena. The particular experiment that gave me today's topic asked the question: "What causes bumps in the road?" The answer wasn't as scientific as the scientists had hoped.

Anyone who's driven on a dirt road knows that it's hard to find a smooth dirt road. No matter where you are, those bumps pop up like a washboard. But one thing is indisputable, though, and that is the more heavily traveled the road, the bigger the bumps. And the longer the bumps are left as is, they're going to expand — they'll go from a washboard to looking like railroad ties — the dream of the guy who does front-end alignments.

Well apparently a couple of physicists took on the study of bumps. They weren't the first to blaze this trail. Over the years, there were theories about bumps. Was it humidity? Some said that bumps are caused by truck suspensions. Some said it's the tires. A few others thought it had to do with the size of a grain of dirt. Still others addressed how tightly compacted the top of the bump was in comparison to the bottom of the bump. And admit it — you had no idea that bumps had tops and bottoms

To the credit and glory of the physicists who persevered against all odds, it's none of these. Turns out the cause of bumps in the road is us. No matter how smooth the surface, no matter how often it's smoothed or compacted, the bumps will return. And we're the reason why.

When a tire hits dirt, the forward motion of the tire moves the dirt slightly forward. As these irregularities get hit again and again and again, the bump grows.

So the bottom line—the only lasting way to eliminate bumps is to pave the road! And just like any community, if we in aviation get tired of dealing with specific bumps, we'll find ways working together to eliminate the bumps, to pave them.

Lately, aviation has had quite a few bumps in the road, and if we're candid with ourselves, many of these bumps are indeed self-inflicted. There's a lot going on in our business today, and some of the issues have plagued us for years. I read a chapter in the history of the FAA and it talked about the friction between controllers and engineers over new technology.

The paragraph was talking about the Kennedy Administration.

There's also the fight of the early pilots who just knew that using a radio was a perfectly fine way to report their positions; "Why would we need people watching us on radar?"

When you look at today's headlines, you see that aviation has been hit with a wave of bumps we can label quite appropriately as an extreme need to refocus on professionalism. And perhaps we even need to develop a better understanding of professionalism. The overshoot of Minneapolis is a very sad example. As a pilot, it doesn't matter much whether they were using their laptops, or re-enacting the Lincoln-Douglas debates — what they did was wrong and they lost total situational awareness and that's why their Airman's Certificates have been revoked. There is no substitute for situational awareness. They knew a lot better and they were trained a lot better. And they ignored it. But especially in the context of our push for professionalism, this whole incident is extremely disappointing.

The passengers aboard that airplane sat comfortably because they assumed that the people up front were paying attention. Being distracted by compound problems is always a risk in the cockpit, which is why the captain and the first officer are trained and professional paid positions. You get paid to be a professional. That's actually the definition of the difference between being a professional and an amateur.

But I think that this is a sign of a much bigger problem. I can't regulate professionalism. With everything we know about human factors, there are still those who just ignore the common sense rules of safety. At the top of the list is something every pilot has heard over the years from their flight instructors: Remember to first always fly the airplane.

I wish this were the only instance of a loss of focus, but it's not. Listen to the cockpit tapes from the accident in Buffalo. Same problem, the one thing those two were supposed to do is the one thing they didn't: pay attention. Juxtapose that with Captain Sullenberger. There was not one second of less than total concentration. That crew was the epitome of professionalism and a textbook case of focus by everyone, including the controllers. That is an example of being in the game especially when the stakes are so high.

The national airspace system is not a video game with a reset button for when you make a mistake. And occasionally we need to be reminded that it's a privilege — not a right — to fly in it. The foundation of that right is all of us obeying the rules that make it safe.

Our highways and railways are set up on the same principle. Fly right or don't fly at all.

When you see examples like this, it makes you wonder. But the good news here is that the system is dominated by and operated by and with professionals — you — who recognize that we all must deal with the bumps, that we all must step up. Just the other day, I learned that 22 percent of all trucks that get pulled over are not in compliance with the rules. Aviation's noncompliance is just a tiny sliver of that because we all recognize that when it comes to safety, "close enough" is never good enough. It's got to be that way. With as many bumps as we have, the good news is actually very good: almost always, we're paying attention to the right things at the right time.

As you know, this Administration wants to get rid of any bumps on the path to air traffic modernization. NextGen is important here, and it's important internationally. We have no plans to go it alone. Toward that end, we are placing a heavy emphasis on establishing a seamless weave between NextGen and SESAR.

Vicki Cox and Di Reimold are making sure that we connect the dots. But like any community, we will all have to work together to pave the way and eliminate any bumps.

But it's clear that we need consistency and focus to make this happen. This is a global industry, and it takes a global view from each of us to make things fly right. I think that first and foremost, we need to work as a team. We need to share flight plans, develop common procedures. We need systems that allow our pilots to fly into each other's airspaces. We need to share data. There has to be a consistency in the rules. And as global partners we must work together to determine the need for new rules.

It's also clear that air traffic modernization can't be an intercontinental competition. We have to work together to make sure that what's on the drawing board is a good fit for the system too. That's why the goal in our modernization efforts needs to be in the payoff: NextGen and SESAR must deliver operational efficiencies. If nothing else, the dollar cost of fuel, the social cost of carbon and our focus on being green are proof enough that NextGen and SESAR need to be hand-in-glove each step of the way. And we are talking with other authorities around the globe about their plans for the future. A few weeks ago I was in Japan and China...and both of those countries are devising their future programs — CARATS in Japan and CNATS in China. So the energy in making sure we are harmonized is evident in every corner of the globe.

The RTCA report told us very clearly where industry stands, and we are adjusting plans accordingly.

We've already begun transitioning to NextGen with the introduction of performance-based navigation, and with the acquisition phase of ADS-B. There are R&D activities for

continuing operational improvements between now and 2018. The interest in this program is keen at the very highest levels in the government. And the interest is keen from our international partners as well, government and industry alike.

But even at that, the toughest part about harmonization remains commitment. We, both here and with our partners abroad, need to keep our focus.

Part of that focus must be the continuous export of best practices. Safety, SMS, new procedures, new ways of getting things done. Those are the kinds of things that can't be proprietary.

The point is simple. If any of us tries to go it alone, quite clearly, we're not going to go as far as we need to. Without partnership, we simply can't get there from here. Globalization of the world is here. Our industry must be in step with that movement.

As long as we recognize our place in the equation for bumps in the road — and there will be bumps — I'm confident.

I saw IATA's survey last week, expressing optimism among airline CFOs. I share that optimism, as long as we pay attention to the bumps in the road. Thank you.