

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

February 10, 2025

Chris Rocheleau
Acting Administrator
Federal Aviation Administration
800 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20591

Dear Mr. Rocheleau:

In the aftermath of the January 29, 2025 mid-air collision between a Mitsubishi Heavy Industries (MHI) RJ Aviation (Bombardier) CRJ700 and a Sikorsky UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport (“National Airport”), we write to request information from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) on plans to protect the public during the investigations and once the investigations are complete. As the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) investigation into the causes and factors behind the collision is carried out, the FAA should identify and implement immediate steps to improve safety for aviation industry personnel, the flying public, and the communities that surround National Airport.

As we mourn the victims of this tragedy, we must work together to ensure that collisions like this one do not happen again in honor of the memory of those lost. We applaud the FAA’s decision to restrict helicopter traffic near National Airport until the NTSB preliminary report is released and to pause of the use of two of the smaller runways at the airport. Your collaboration thus far with the NTSB as it carries out an independent, fact-based, and thorough investigation into this incident is appreciated. While the NTSB works to complete their investigation, it is crucial that we thoroughly review and scrutinize the protocols that govern flight operations near the airspace over National Airport, and ensure that we are not simply restarting “normal” operations. This is of further importance in light of the FAA’s steps to ensure airspace safety after Congress’s decision last year to add additional traffic to this airspace.

While we applaud FAA for early actions taken to bolster safety, recent actions indicate that your agency is inviting inexperienced individuals with intense partisan leanings into a process that should be objective and expert driven. On February 5, 2025, Elon Musk announced via X (formerly known as Twitter) that “With the support of President @realDonaldTrump, the @DOGE team will aim to make rapid safety upgrades to the air traffic control system. Just a few days ago, the FAA’s primary aircraft safety notification system failed for several hours!” Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, also on X, stated “Big News – Talked to the DOGE team. They are going to plug in to help upgrade our aviation system.”

We are extremely concerned that an ad hoc team of individuals lacking any expertise, exposure, certifications, or knowledge of aviation operations being invited, or inserting themselves, to make “rapid” changes to our nation’s air traffic systems. This the wrong course of action to take.

We want the safest skies in the world, and any efforts to weaken standards will not be tolerated. Aviation safety is not an area to “move fast and break things”. Proven, methodical, and deliberate action is what is called for when any changes are considered to safety. We express in the strongest possible terms our alarm at allowing Musk’s cadre of unvetted, untrained, and unaccountable individuals the ability to make changes to complicated and sensitive FAA policies at a time when serious and knowledgeable people should be in charge.

Safety must not be compromised, and FAA's actions must be based on knowledgeable and accountable experts. Given our shared goal of promoting safety along with our expressed concerns about how DOGE's involvement could jeopardize that safety, we request your attention and response to the following questions:

1. The FAA's current restrictions on helicopter flights at National Airport are tied to the release of NTSB's preliminary report. What factors will FAA consider as it reassesses the need for extending or modifying the restrictions? Please provide details on, and documentation sufficient to substantiate, additional safety measures that are being contemplated and/or will be proposed to deconflict or otherwise improve safety in the air space over National Airport.
2. As you assess the need for additional measures, will you commit to consulting recognized aviation experts – both in and out of the federal government – to identify requirements or operational changes for civil and military aviation in the National Capital Region?
3. On February 4, less than one week from the incident, reports emerged that FAA directed its personnel to cease participating in Federal advisory or aviation rulemaking committees. Were FAA personnel directed to cease participating in these committees?
 - a. If true, please describe the rationale for such a decision and provide documentation sufficient to substantiate any directives received from other Federal government officials, other individuals acting under the direction of the President, or who are otherwise asserting a legal authority to direct or influence decision-making at the FAA.
4. On February 5, 2025, Elon Musk and Secretary Duffy each announced that DOGE would “upgrade our aviation system”.
 - a. Were you informed of this decision in advance of either social media posting?
 - b. What engagement have you had with DOGE at this time?
 - c. What engagement has been discussed or is planned for the future?
 - d. Do you have knowledge of what comprises the “rapid safety upgrades” Musk tweeted about?
 - e. Do you commit to timely report to Congress any actions that the FAA is directed to undertake at the direction of the President, DOGE, or by the Office of the Secretary of Transportation regarding any aspect of aviation safety?
 - f. Do you commit to providing the public with details about what recommendations DOGE staff and representatives provide to you in relation to aviation safety? Will you notify Congress if you elect to follow through on any recommendations provided to you by DOGE staff and representatives?
 - g. In your prior experience at FAA, has any special government employee been directed or otherwise empowered to influence FAA officials on safety decisions?
5. Will you commit the full cooperation and support of the FAA to the NTSB investigation and to swiftly implement its recommendations?
6. Will you commit to examining the communication processes and protocols between FAA, the U.S. Department of Defense, and other stakeholders that are used during aviation operations in and around National Airport and the National Capital Region?

7. Will you commit to working with the U.S. Department of Defense to evaluate training protocols for required missions in the National Capital Region, particularly those around National Airport and during high-traffic periods, and enact any modifications needed to reduce risk?
8. Will you commit to briefing us on the implementation of changes to the slot (i.e., high density) rule included in the 2024 FAA Reauthorization Act, given that the first of the routes authorized under that legislation will become operational this week?

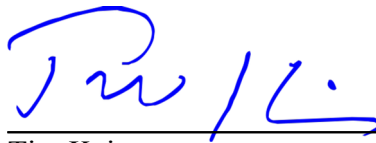
In addition to the above questions, we request that you provide us with a briefing on FAA's implementation of critical aviation safety and air traffic controller tower staffing provisions in the 2024 FAA Reauthorization Act and on the implementation of Section of 502 of that Act.

We look forward to your swift response and to working together for the best interests of the public, the National Capital Region, and the United States of America.

Sincerely,



Mark R. Warner
United States Senator



Tim Kaine
United States Senator



Chris Van Hollen
United States Senator



Donald S. Beyer Jr.
Member of Congress



Gerald E. Connolly
Member of Congress



Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress



Jamie Raskin
Member of Congress



Suhas Subramanyam
Member of Congress