

# KETCHIKAN GATEWAY BOROUGH

Office of the Borough Manager - 344 Front Street - Ketchikan, Alaska 99901

Roy Eckert  
Borough Manager  
(907) 228-6625  
Fax: (907) 247-6625  
mgr@borough.ketchikan.ak.us

February 6, 2003

Mr. R. J. Doll  
Director  
State of Alaska  
Dept. of Transportation and Public Facilities  
Southeast Region

Dear Mr. Doll,

I am responding to your letters dated November 25, 2002 and January 10, 2003. I am not apologizing for the delay, due to the fact that the alleged deficiencies in the Ketchikan airport operations were not well documented, and I was not given any copies of Mr. Binkie's supposed supporting documents, which has resulted in my having to take the time to do my own investigation to see if there is any basis for Mr. Binkie's conclusions.

I would like to state for the record that Mr. Binkie did not contact me at any time during his visit here, even for an introductory visit, nor did he express his findings to either myself or Mr. Dave Allen, our Airport Director, prior to briefing you. I feel that due to the serious nature of the allegations made by Mr. Binkie which resulted in your remarks that, "The visit revealed sufficient deficiencies to threaten its continued operation", that he should have, at the very least, given me the professional courtesy of a visit while he was here. As of the date of this letter I have never heard from Mr. Binkie, nor have I ever met him.

I am less than impressed with the quality of Mr. Binkie's work and I can only guess as to what prompted his visit in the first place. From what I have learned, it appears that Mr. Binkie was here *not* on a routine inspection, but was here based on some complaints by disgruntled employees that have regularly made similar complaints in the past, apparently for personal agendas. But again, that is speculation, because I have not been afforded the courtesy of being involved in any discussions with him or you.

In your letter dated January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2003 you stated ". . . Mike Binkie would provide excellent assistance to the Ketchikan Airport as he has handled similar issues throughout the southeast region for many years." Please understand that from a Manager's viewpoint, the way this issue has been handled does not give me confidence in Mr. Binkie's ability to work with the Borough.

In your letter of January 10<sup>th</sup> you also stated "the department has no intention of becoming involved in the business end of running the Ketchikan Airport." I am getting mixed signals here, because in a letter from the City of Ketchikan to me dated January 17, 2003, the acting CITY (*not Borough*) attorney states in a memo to City Manager Karl Amylon concerning fire-fighting at the Ketchikan Airport:

"(Fire) Chief Leipfert informs me that according to Mike Binkie, Regional Airport Safety and Compliance Officer for the State Department of Transportation, that the State expects that both aircraft personnel and on-the-ground fire fighters will attempt interior fire suppression and rescue when sufficient personnel are available, and that this approach is in place at other Southeast Alaska airports."

You may or may not be aware of a difference of opinion regarding a mutual aid agreement between the Borough and City regarding fire service to the airport, but that is indeed a matter of the business end of running the airport and Mr. Binkie has inserted himself right in the middle of it. His comments to the City Fire Chief have given the City the impetus to try and force the Borough to pay \$37,000 to the City for the stated purpose of formal Airport Rescue and Firefighting (ARFF) training for City personnel, which is not required by any standard. Failure by the Borough to so pay will cause the City to drop the mutual aid agreement between the City and the Airport. At the very least, the Borough should have been notified and courtesy copied of any discussion and/or correspondence to the City concerning the operations of the airport. Other than the memo from the City, we have no knowledge of what was said, discussed, or the intent of the conversation in question. Hence my concern about your statement "the department has no intention of becoming involved in the business end of running the Ketchikan Airport." For the State to insert itself into the local political arena is, in my opinion, totally inappropriate.

Now it has come to my attention that someone from your office forwarded copies of the letters from both you and Mr. Binkie to the City, which they conveniently supplied to the press on Monday, after I provided them a letter on Friday stating that we were not going to pay them the requested \$37,000 for ARFF training. These actions have caused undue harm to the relationship between the Department of Transportation and the Borough, which may very well result in the Borough taking action to give the airport back to the State.

Please do not misunderstand the tone of this letter. I am not implying that there is not room for improvement in the operations of the Ketchikan Airport, for there certainly is. But the way this has been handled leaves no room for improvement based on facts -- only on reaction, and that is not in any way productive nor professional. I will not be dragged into a non-professional situation or forced into giving a knee-jerk reaction to undocumented allegations. I believe in due-diligence and supporting documentation before making decisions.

From the tone of your first letter, I am sensing an attitude of the State wishing to take back ownership and operation of the Ketchikan Airport. I have several Assembly Members who are pursuing this option, and if that is indeed your wish, I need to know immediately, because some Assembly members have requested that this option be discussed at a regular Assembly meeting in the very near future. We need to discuss all options that are open to us, such as, but not limited to the following:

1. Giving the airport back to the State.
2. Continuing to operate the Airport as is.
3. Borough operation of the Airport with a private outside operator/manager.
4. Total ownership of all airport properties, including lands and facilities, by the Borough.
5. Giving the runway and associated operations back to the State, with the Borough maintaining control of the terminal and the ferry system (which we own). You could then remedy any alleged deficiencies at your expense.

To avoid the Borough giving the Airport back to the State, especially after Mr. Binkie's comments and your subsequent correspondence, I feel that several things need to happen for any one of options 2, 3 or 4 to be possible.

- Due to the massive increase in insurance costs this year (over \$100,000 more than even the major increase we had budgeted), the Borough would have to have some relief in

cost of insurance, hopefully in the form of allowing the airport to come under the State's insurance coverage. That would possibly allow the Airport to be able to operate in the black again. To continue to operate in the red is going to without doubt cause the Airport to be given back to the State.

- Written authorization from the State for the Borough to provide for contract management of all airport operations, including the ferry service to and from the airport. In my opinion, this would solve numerous concerns.
- Option 4 would take some serious negotiation on the part of the State and the Borough before it would be feasible, if it is even a possibility.

The only other item I would like to address is your comment in your letter dated November 25, 2002, which states, in part, "Employee numbers have been reduced to a level that jeopardizes the airport's ability to comply with FAA Part 139.303, 'sufficient qualified personnel.' The airport location on an island, separated from the supporting resources of the Borough and the City of Ketchikan, enhances the need for independent emergency response, as well as routine maintenance capability."

In fact, we DO meet the FAA Part 139.303 requirements. Again, I feel that this concern is politically motivated, and in light of Mr. Binkie's comments to the City Fire Chief and the resulting demand from the City for the Borough to pay \$37,000 to have City fire personnel ARFF trained, it brings up your point about "sufficient qualified personnel," which I have to assume you mean fire and emergency personnel. I would like to address that subject in more detail.

If it is your contention that we should increase our level of ARFF support on the airport due to our geological separation from mutual aid, what specific level of personnel and qualifications would you recommend as adequate? Based upon results of FAA inspections, we understand that Ketchikan International Airport already has sufficient ARFF personnel to meet the FAA requirements for an Index B airport, but the Airport never has had adequate equipment or personnel for a structure fire in a terminal or hangar, and we have never been required to staff the next level of ARFF service, which is aircraft interior firefighting and rescue. To comply with National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards, we would need four ARFF personnel in order to provide the next level of service, which is interior fire suppression and rescue. Assuming the Borough had sufficient mutual aid to perform this next level of service (recall that we did have a mutual aid agreement in place at the time of Mr. Binkie's inspection), do you propose the Borough should maintain a minimum of four ARFF personnel on duty? If so, are you prepared to staff Ketchikan International Airport at that level if the airport is given back to the state?

Do you intend to require that the additional personnel have additional qualifications, such as structural and EMT? If you propose a number less than four ARFF personnel, please explain how two or three personnel could (in compliance with FAR requirements) perform any functions beyond that of the first responder. We welcome new ideas, for we have yet to determine there would be any additional benefits from modest increases in ARFF staffing. Adding one or even two more ARFF staff per shift would not increase our ability to respond at all. Our current ARFF staffing levels meet FAA requirements.

If you feel that we need to address the structural firefighting issue by adding adequate personnel and training, then we will also need at least two (2) additional pieces of equipment, specifically a

February 6, 2003

tanker and a pumper, as well as a fully equipped ambulance. Are there grants available to fund such equipment, or is the State willing to pay for such equipment?

As for a volunteer fire department at the airport, I have had a preliminary discussion with TSA to see if the TSA employees could be trained and used in that capacity, and it will be investigated. That option makes a lot of sense, given the fact that during a fire incident, security would be totally compromised by having non-security cleared civilians running all over the airport, unless they were totally TSA employees, or a full-time paid security-cleared fire department. Again, without State help, this would cause the Borough to have to give the Airport back to the State.

Finally, let me reiterate that there certainly is room for improvement in the management of the Ketchikan Airport. But to state in your letter that "The visit revealed sufficient deficiencies to threaten its continued operation" is not, in my opinion, founded in fact. I can only conclude that the State of Alaska wants to take back complete operation, maintenance and control of the Ketchikan Airport. Your letters and actions do not seem to give us much of an option regarding this issue. I feel that the "return the airport to the State" option is not in the best interest of the Borough or the State. I will personally try to find a workable solution to prevent that from happening, but I have to be honest that it is going to be difficult to prevent, given the political arena that this has fallen into.

The specific concerns you mentioned are addressed by the enclosed response, which was made after a thorough investigation by Borough staff.

Sincerely,



Roy A. Eckert  
Borough Manager

Attachment: 2/5/03 Memorandum from Airport Director Dave Allen

c: Governor Frank Murkowski  
Senator Robin Taylor  
Representative Bill Williams  
DOT Commissioner Barton  
KGB Mayor and Assembly