UNWTO International Summit on Tourism and Climate Change, Davos

Robert J Aaronson opening intervention

Good afternoon.

Airports are the gateways to the cities, regions and countries they serve – they are the first and last impression of a nation's tourism infrastructure, they are vital connections to the outside world for all other forms of business and they provide important links to family members in distant places.

Airports are vital members of communities. They provide jobs and they provide economic benefits. They are also the point of contact that the aviation industry has with terra firma. And so airports are the very first to hear about most environmental concerns, particularly noise and local air quality.

It has been these two factors that have provided the most repeated blockage to airport projects since airports first began to be built. Now, a third objection is being heard in development planning enquiries, particularly in the UK. Climate change is definitely on the agenda.

I believe that most of the aviation industry is aware of the challenge that faces our world from global warming. You will have heard the statistics many times – aviation is 2%, rising to 3% by 2050, electricity generation produces more CO2 than flying, cars produce more, cows produce more – and while all those things are true, they are not an excuse to do nothing. We do affect the environment as an industry. It is up to all of us, corporations, governments, individuals… tourists, to reduce our footprint in whatever way we can.

We in the aviation industry are very aware of our responsibility to the environment. But responsibilities cannot only be to one cause, or in one direction. We also have a responsibility to the economy and to the many social benefits that our industry brings – including to the tourism sectors in nations that have no other major form of foreign income.

A number of people in the environmental lobby are calling for a ban on new airport facilities as a 'quick fix' solution. While we in the airport industry are not in favour of expansion at any cost, there also needs to be a balance in priorities that govern decision-making. A well considered and careful planning process will ensure that infrastructure is not developed unnecessarily, but we cannot ignore the potential savings in emissions that can result from better capacity. This has the potential to reduce unnecessary circling and congestion and with it fuel burn and emissions. Sustainability is key.

There are also some major emissions reduction possibilities just within our grasp – like the single European sky for air traffic management, a global aviation emissions trading scheme and some very real solutions to ground congestion in the US and Europe – that are at the will of governments. The aviation industry wants them, the public will benefit and the planet will benefit too – let us not continue to be bound just by politics in these matters.

Airports are living up to their environmental responsibilities in many ways – some of them very innovative! And, while the proportion of the industry's emissions that airports have direct control over is very small, each one of the varied and innovative projects helps to reduce the footprint of airports, one step at a time.

- Dallas Fort/Worth Airport has converted all of its light- and medium-weight ground vehicles and nearly three-quarters of its heavy vehicles to run on alternative fuels – with the aim of having the whole fleet completed in a couple of years. Phoenix, Los Angeles and many other airports are committed to the same programmes.
- Zurich International Airport has installed fixed electrical ground power on all its aircraft stands and made its use mandatory.
- The airport operator in Sweden has committed to become totally carbon neutral in the next few years – and is on target to meet that goal.
- BAA in the United Kingdom invested in public transport some time ago and now around five and a half million passengers use the Heathrow Express train service each year, cutting significantly the number of cars travelling to the airport.
- Many airports have invested in 'smart building' terminal control technology which dramatically cuts down on energy use by regulating the lighting and air conditioning to respond to passenger arrivals and departures and replacing traditional sources of energy with alternative forms.
- Vancouver and San Francisco Airports have installed arrays of solar panels on their vast terminal roofs that will replace electricity from the national grid with the ultimate in renewable energy.
- Speaking of roofs… Melbourne Airport in Australia has coated the roof of its terminal in a revolutionary new paint. This reduces the internal temperature of the building by up to 15 degrees in summer, cutting air conditioning use by almost half.
- Narita Airport in Tokyo has successfully reduced its noise footprint by introducing an economic incentive in the form of differentiated landing fees for quieter aircraft… perhaps there is a similar model that could relate to older, less fuel efficient aircraft with higher emissions? *In fact, just last week Frankfurt and Munich Airports announced a new initiative to charge more for older, more polluting airport – this starts from January next year and ACI will be monitoring its progress to determine if this is a model that could be used at other airports.*

None of these programmes is world changing in itself. None of them are headline grabbers. But small steps at every airport around the world can make a big impact – the examples I have mentioned are just a small illustration of the thousands of projects underway at airports.

ACI will continue encouraging its airports to do what they can to reduce their emissions and dependence on energy. We will keep encouraging the small steps all over the world. After all, marathons are finished one step at a time, mountains are climbed one step at a time and people walk into their travel agents to book tours to far off lands… one step at a time.

I look forward to our discussions here today. Thank you.