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# Retired chief pilot warns against third runway

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RETIRED CHIEF PILOT,  
NORTHWEST AIRLINES (RETIRED 5/01)

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During my 34 plus years as a commercial airline pilot I logged more than 15,000 hours flying everything from the 707 to 747. In my role as Western and Pacific Region Director of Flying for Northwest Airlines, whom I am NOT speaking for or representing at this time, I was responsible for managing 1,000 pilots and working with airport issues, air safety, air traffic, pilot training and other important matters involving airline operations. I have lived and flown in and out of Seattle since 1966. It is this background, along with a pilot's intense focus on safety that leads me to the conclusion that the proposed third runway at Sea-Tac will not be used.

The Port proposes to build this 8,500-foot runway west of and parallel to the two existing runways at Sea-Tac (16R-34L is 9425' and 16L-34R is 11,900' in length). Less than 100 feet from the western edge of the runway's FAA Runway Safety Area would be a vertical drop of 170 feet. There is an additional 75-foot vertical wall that would be constructed to the immediate north of the runway's north threshold. Both of these vertical drops create safety concerns.

In addition to posing grave threats to aircraft that over/undershoot, overrun or veer off the runway (caused by things such as blown tires, snow and similar conditions), the high walls and embankments surrounding the runway also introduce wind-related safety issues. The proximity of these large walls to the proposed runway could very well compromise aircraft safety during landing or take-off by creating or magnifying downdraft or updraft wind shear conditions.

A major concern with the proposed 3rd runway is the increased threat of runway incursion. Run-

way incursions are already increasing at an alarming rate nationwide. (Runway incursions are incidents of aircraft crossing active runways without permission or as a result of controller error, creating a safety hazard of imminent collision of two aircraft or an aircraft with a vehicle on the same runway.) Aircraft landing on the third runway would have to cross two active runways to reach the terminal. The number of such crossings would double by having to cross two active runways instead of one. Should the new runway be the low visibility runway as planned, there is an even larger risk of runway incursions during poor visibility. Because aircraft would use this new runway primarily during busy periods the time spent waiting (delays) to cross the two other runways, would add to flight delays. The total extra time to taxi to and from the third runway would be a lot longer since it is further from the terminal. During peak operations today, aircraft often have to wait to fit into the long line waiting for take-off. Delays would also impact aircraft waiting to take off on the other two runways, as they would have to wait for aircraft crossing the two runways after landing on the proposed third runway.

It is important to understand that Sea-Tac is more airspace constrained than runway constrained, especially in low visibility, due to the natural topography resulting in a north-south only flow in and out of this region. Boeing and Renton airports share the same airspace as Sea-Tac. The worse the weather, the more airspace-restricted Sea-Tac becomes. The proposed third runway is a 'dependent' runway and although the cost is that of a new runway (even though the costs greatly exceed that of the average new runway), we will not get the full benefit of a new runway

because it will always be a 'dependent' runway due to the close proximity of the current two runways.

Pilots care about air safety and passenger convenience. Cost, public controversy or other extraneous issues will not influence their decision about which runway to request when landing at Sea-Tac. They will choose the runway closest to the terminal to avoid ground delays and minimize the number of active runways that must be crossed. They will also choose the longest runway when landing a heavy, wide body aircraft, especially in bad weather or low visibility. (The existing runway nearest the terminal is 1,500 feet longer than the proposed third runway.) Air Traffic Control must honor any pilot's request if at all possible.

Another concern is the fire and rescue equipment, which is currently located at the northeast side of the airport. In any emergency on the proposed third runway, the rescue equipment would have to cross the other two runways, thus closing the airport until all the emergency equipment had returned to the fire station.

The Sea-Tac third runway is very expensive, 2 billion dollars, and will not dramatically address the so-called capacity issues. It will not materially reduce delays and will not be used by many pilots because of the many safety issues it presents.

In the early 1970's the airport built what they called a commuter runway. It was located in very close proximity to where they are proposing the new third runway. It was called runway 17. It went unused due to pilots requesting the longer runways closer to the terminal, and it eventually was converted to an expensive taxiway called taxiway C. I am afraid the proposed third runway will also stand as a monument to poor planning as did runway 17.