Aviation System Policy Issues

Scope and geography of the discussion

Aviation is one of the four statutory systems named in the Metropolitan Land Planning Act. According to [Minn. Stat. 473.146](#), the Council's Transportation Policy Plan shall include "a long-range assessment of air transportation trends and factors that may affect airport development in the metropolitan area and policies and strategies that will ensure a comprehensive, coordinated, and timely investigation and evaluation of alternatives for airport development." Our regional airport system includes nine publicly-owned airports, located in urban, suburban and rural locations.
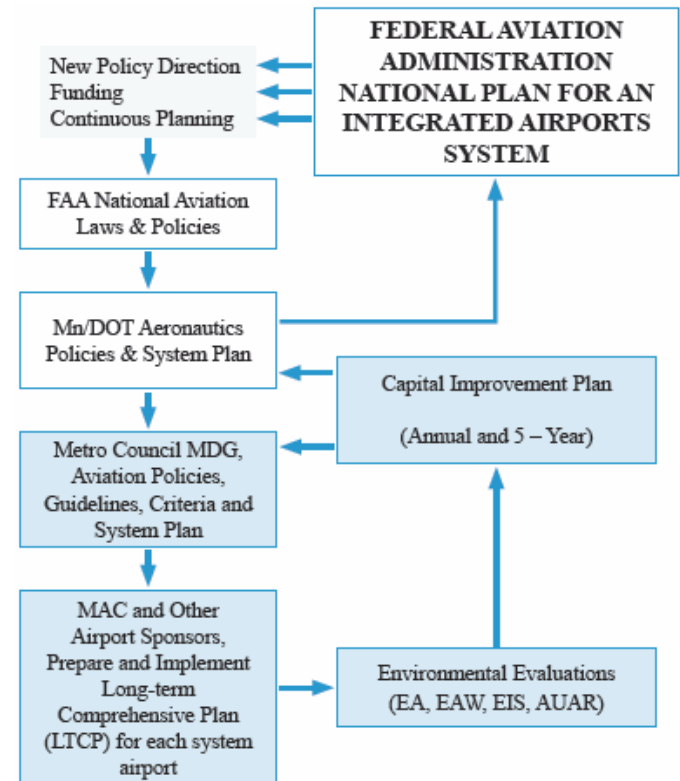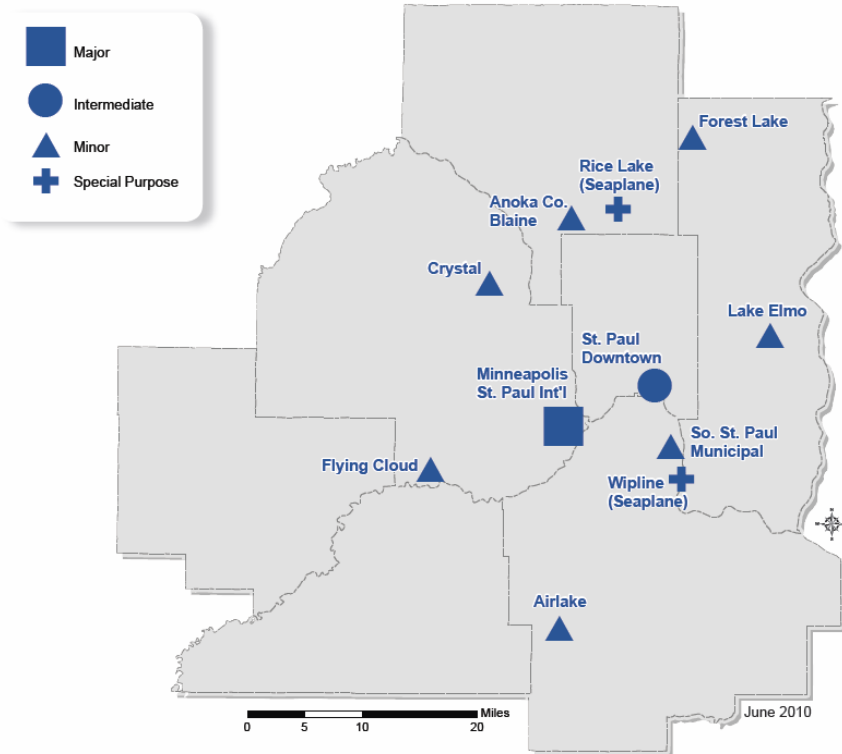

These airports are classified as:

- Major Airport (Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport (MSP));
- Intermediate Airport (Downtown St. Paul);
- Minor Airports (Anoka County/Blaine, Flying Cloud (Eden Prairie), Crystal, Lake Elmo, Airlake, South St. Paul, Forest Lake); and
- Special Purpose Airport (Rice Lake Seaplane).

The regional aviation system lives within a complex network of regulation and responsibility, including roles for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), the state through the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), the Metropolitan Airports Commission (MAC), and the Metropolitan Council.

The state Legislature twice tasked the Council to study alternative locations for the MSP International Airport – Ham Lake (in the 1970s) and Dakota County (in the 1990s). In 1996, the Legislature concluded that MSP would not be relocated. Since then, the system focus has been to complete a $3.1B expansion of MSP and to make improvements to several of the reliever airports for business jet flying.

Existing policy direction

The overall objective for the regional aviation system is to connect the region to the rest of the nation and the world, thereby promoting the region's economic competitiveness. All of the region's airports have been in place at least 50 years, so many airports that were originally in rural areas have seen development arise around them and create new tensions around land uses. A major Council role in aviation has been to ensure that compatible land uses develop in and around airports and to be a liaison between MAC and local governments.

The *Regional Development Framework* addresses aviation in Policy 2:

- Support airport facilities investments to keep pace with market needs and maintain the region's economic vitality:
  o Increase runway and terminal capacity;
  o Maintain, improve and expand our system of reliever airports;
  o Ensure that adequate airport capacity is available;
  o Work with local communities to mitigate the adverse impacts of airports and ensure compatible land uses in adjacent areas.

Under Minn. Stat. 473.611 and 473.165, the Metropolitan Council reviews the individual long term comprehensive plan for each airport in the regional system for consistency with the Council's regional policy. The current policy is that airport long term comprehensive plans are to be updated every five years to inform the Council's update of the regional aviation system plan and surrounding communities' comprehensive plans.

For more information, see the Aviation chapter of the Transportation Policy Plan and pages 10-11 of the *Regional Development Framework*.

Tensions

❖ The Council has worked to ensure that compatible land uses develop in and around the airports and in particular within the noise contours resulting from operational guidelines from the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA). The FAA has recently proposed changes to flight patterns out of the MSP airport that would redefine the noise contours associated with the airport, thereby making existing land uses less compatible with future flight paths.

❖ Decisions to close airports require joint action by MAC, the FAA, and the Council; Council policy has been to consider any references to redevelopment of an airport as a system departure. Nonetheless, some communities that host airports dream about how they'd like to redevelop the land once an airport closes (see the conversation associated with Crystal's most recent Comprehensive Plan Update).

Questions for discussion

❖ Will the Council take a proactive or a reactive role when operational decisions by partner agencies (such as the FAA and MAC) have the potential to increase aviation conflicts with existing land uses?

❖ When operational decisions create new conflicts between aviation and existing land uses, will the Council provide additional technical assistance to help communities plan for transitions to more aviation-compatible land uses?

❖ Since the 2010 Transportation Policy Plan added the Forest Lake airport to the regional aviation system, Council staff think that the regional aviation system is a mature system and anticipate that neither additional airports nor airport closures will be needed by 2040. The existing system provides adequate capacity with broad geographic coverage across the region. Should Thrive MSP 2040 retain the Regional Development Framework's language of "maintain, improve and expand our system of reliever airports" or update the language to "maintain, improve and preserve our system of reliever airports"?