

## Leesburg Executive Airport Air Traffic Control Talking Points

### Remote Tower Program Background

1. In 2015, Leesburg Executive Airport (JYO) was approached by Saab Inc. and the Virginia SATSLab about being a test site for Saab's remote tower technology. Subsequently, JYO became the first airport in the country to implement a remote tower program through the FAA's Remote Tower Pilot program.
2. The remote tower system installed at JYO utilizes high-definition cameras and displays, maneuverable optical and infrared cameras, microphones, and a signal-light-gun to provide data directly to air traffic controllers at a remote tower center located just outside of the airport property. In [date], the FAA installed a radar system at JYO to further enhance ATC services. Controllers at the remote tower center have the same tools as at other traditional air traffic control towers, but use live video, radar, and other technology instead of direct vision to detect and direct air traffic at the busy general aviation airport.
3. In June 2018, the remote tower at JYO went into operation and has provided air traffic control service continuously for 10 hours a day (8 a.m. to 6 p.m.) daily since then.
4. In October 2020, JYO was accepted into the FAA's Federal Contract Tower (FCT) program. Given the success of the remote tower up to that point, Town of Leesburg officials anticipated that the remote tower technology would be certified by the FAA as an eligible alternative to a brick-and-mortar tower for purposes of the FCT program (meaning that the FAA would pay for the controllers and the airport would maintain the tower). Therefore, the Town of Leesburg did not pursue development of a brick-and-mortar tower – typically a five-year process – at that time.
5. In September 2021, the FAA issued an Operational Viability Decision (OVD) memo on the Leesburg Remote Tower (RT) System. According to the memo, the FAA conducted extensive air traffic operational evaluations of the system and convened "more than a dozen Safety Risk Management (SRM) assessments". The OVD also documented that "all safety performance targets have been met through all periods of operational use of the Saab Inc. RT System for the provision of ATC services at JYO" and led the FAA to determine that the Saab system installed at JYO was "operationally viable ... for the provision of ATC services".
6. Annual aircraft operations (takeoffs and landings) increased 47% from Fiscal Year 2019, the first full year of ATC services provided by the remote tower, to Fiscal Year 2022. Jet arrivals at the airport increased 36% over the same time period. During that time, the Town is not aware of any operational issues with the RT System or safety incidents attributable to the RT System.
7. On Tuesday, February 21, 2023, Paul Fontaine, acting director of the FAA's NextGen program, informed JYO Airport Director Scott Coffman that the FAA was canceling the Remote Tower Pilot Program and advised that June 14, 2023, would be the last day of air traffic control services at JYO. The Town of Leesburg received no prior communications from the FAA that they were considering cancellation of the remote tower program.

## **Impact of Loss of ATC Services at JYO**

1. Leesburg Executive Airport lies within the Special Flight Rules Area (SFRA), a security airspace zone established around the nation's capital. The tower at Leesburg is an important communication link with the National Capital Region Coordination Center to help resolve discrepancies and airspace violations in that zone.
2. The remote tower at Leesburg handles more than 75,000 takeoffs and landings each year, nearly the same as Norfolk International Airport and more than the Roanoke and Williamsburg-Newport News Airports.
3. In addition to a 47% increase in aircraft operations, new businesses, including a new fixed-based operator, aircraft maintenance, corporate aircraft, and flight schools, have located at JYO since the remote tower began regular operations. The Town opened a new U.S. Customs facility at JYO allowing international arrivals, typically corporate jets from Canada, Europe, and the Caribbean.
4. Going from a towered airport to an un-towered airport would dramatically impact the safety of air operations at JYO. The best analogy we can make is that it will be like removing a traffic signal at a busy intersection of several multi-lane roads and installing stop signs.

## **Developments Since FAA Announced Cancellation of Remote Tower Program**

1. The FAA has committed to allowing a mobile tower to provide ATC services at JYO after the closure of the remote tower.
2. The FAA will procure the mobile tower through their existing contract with Robinson Aviation and will fund the lease of the trailer and the controllers through the end of the current federal fiscal year (September 30, 2023). Currently, the FAA is estimating that the mobile tower will be in place by the end of June.
3. The FAA is working to identify how the radar currently installed in the remote tower can be securely installed in the mobile tower.
4. The FAA and the Town will sign an MOU regarding the provision of ATC services via the mobile tower.
5. The FAA has reset the five-year clock on JYO's candidacy in the FCT program, which originally began in October 2020. Candidacy will be extended until 2028.
6. The Town of Leesburg will begin the process of siting, designing, and constructing a permanent brick-and-mortar tower. That process is estimated to take 5-7 years.

## **Funding for the Mobile Tower After FY23**

1. The FAA's agreement to fund the mobile tower through the end of the current fiscal year leaves a five-to-seven-year funding gap until a permanent tower can be constructed at JYO.

2. The Town of Leesburg's estimate for this funding, if the services are contracted through the Town, is \$720,000 annually.
3. Had the remote tower program never existed, the Town of Leesburg would have begun to plan and construct a brick-and-mortar tower beginning in October 2020. The Town relied on the FAA's continuing support for the RT System to fulfill its obligations under the FTC program.
4. However, because the RT System provided ATC services since June 2018, JYO's aircraft operations have increased significantly, and eliminating ATC services until a brick-and-mortar tower is constructed is not a safe option.
5. While the Town of Leesburg is willing to participate in funding the mobile tower at an appropriate level, the swiftness of the decision to cancel the remote tower has not allowed the Town to properly plan and budget for this unplanned expense.
6. Funding ATC services would nearly double the airport's annual operating budget, an amount that would not be fully recoverable by raising fees. The FAA's Grant Assurances direct airports to operate as financially self-sustaining as possible so that they do not create a financial burden to the sponsoring municipality. The Town of Leesburg wholeheartedly agrees that it should not bear the entire burden of funding ATC services until a permanent tower is constructed. Doing so would shift a significant cost to the taxpaying residents of the Town; JYO serves the region and many, if not most, of the users of the airport are not Leesburg residents.
7. The situation at JYO is unique. There are no other airports facing the loss of ATC services due to the cancellation of the remote tower program. Providing funding to JYO for the mobile tower will not set a precedent for other airports to request similar funding.

### **Future of Remote Tower Technology**

1. The Remote Tower Program at Leesburg has been a success story of federal, state, local, and private industry cooperatively developing and implementing a cost-effective solution for air traffic control services at General Aviation airports. The program has provided continuous ATC services at JYO since June 2018 while numerous safety and system evaluations were conducted by the FAA with input from subject-matter-experts including controller unions.
2. The Town's pursuit of a permanent tower should not be seen as a lack of confidence in or support for remote tower technology. The Town of Leesburg remains committed to the use of technology to provide safe and effective ATC services without the expense of building and maintaining a brick-and-mortar tower.
3. However, the Town's primary concern is the safety of users of JYO and the surrounding airspace that only maintaining ATC services can provide. Given the FAA's decision to terminate the RT System, building a brick-and-mortar tower provides a clear path with a certain timeline to maintain safe and efficient air service at JYO.