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The Rt. Hon. Simon Burns MP
Minister of State for Transport
Department of Transport
Great Minster House
33 Horseferry Road
London
SW1P 4DR

Date: 20/12/12
Tel: (01454) 864039

Dear Mr Burns,

THE FUTURE OF FILTON AIRFIELD

I write, in support of Save Filton Airfield (SFA), on a matter of national importance concerning aviation capacity and the health of the UK Aerospace industry. SFA are writing to you separately but in identical terms. We would like you to consider, in the context of the Government's overall transport and industrial development strategy, the implications of closing and building over Filton Airfield,.

We have received so many stock 'copy, cut and paste' answers to our letters to MPs that it is obvious that none of them has seriously considered the facts and issues before responding.

Filton Airfield offers as an immediate solution to the current airfield capacity problem and its irretrievable destruction will be seen as a monumental error sooner than some may think, for example, when the House of Commons Transport Committee UK Aviation Strategy Inquiry publishes its preliminary report only 6 months to a year hence.

The following bullet points outline some of the main issues surrounding the closure of Filton Airfield. [For a fuller treatment, at the end of this letter, we include a link to our submission to the aforementioned Inquiry. This provides a more complete presentation of the issues and Filton Airfield's potential.]

- In April 2011, BAE Systems made a public announcement that they wished to close Filton Airfield, to which South Gloucestershire Council (SGC) announced their surprise at the news.
- Freedom of Information (FOI) requests, links to which are provided at the end of this letter, revealed that senior officers of SGC knew about the closure and had worked closely with BAE since at least August 2009 to help ensure the path to the closure was as smooth as possible.
- During 2011, SGC repeatedly supported the contention that no decision had been made on whether the airfield was going to be included in their Core Strategy as re-development land.

- The FOI information provides undeniable proof that the senior officers were working on plans to include the airfield in the Core Strategy as windfall redevelopment land from at least May 2011, several months before either any planning studies or the first public consultation was even announced.
- The FOI information also provides proof that, during 2011, senior SGC officers worked in close collaboration with BAE's agents on several reports that attempted to show proof that Filton Airfield was unviable and that were subsequently released as "independent reports".

As these few points show, SGC helped BAe significantly over a matter of years to create a situation whereby BAE could claim that closing the airfield was the only course of action left to them.

The main argument presented to us by all MPs to date: that the closure "was a purely commercial decision for BAE, so there's nothing that can be done" is patently untrue. The true reason for closure is that the airfield is more valuable to both SGC and BAE as development land for housing, which explains their collusion in effectively sterilising forever this unique site as a commercial/aviation/industrial resource.

In view of the significant local government collusion in the closure decision, natural justice and the national interest require the intervention of Her Majesty's Government to consider afresh these decisions before irremediable action is taken.

The essence of our case is as follows:

- Despite all claims to the contrary, Filton Airfield can be profitable, as shown by its accounts for 2010 and 2011. These years show a £1.3M and £500K profit, respectively, even though most businesses that previously operated from the airfield had been pushed out and the operating hours had been significantly reduced. These businesses have told us they would be willing to move back to Filton, given the opportunity and a more business friendly environment.
- If a mixed package of activities were to be operated from Filton, such as aircraft maintenance and repair, general aviation, freight, aircraft livery services, business aviation operations, medical and police helicopter operations, flying schools and an aviation museum housing the unique Concorde that is already on site, to name just a few, then Filton Airfield could be a highly successful and profitable operation.
- It has been stated in many reports over the years that airports are catalysts for attracting many types of businesses into the surrounding area, thereby providing prosperity well beyond the airfield boundary.

Filton is unique in this country in that has a highly successful aircraft manufacturing operation situated alongside, which provides many thousands of highly skilled and highly paid jobs to the surrounding communities.

If the airfield is allowed to close, the catalyst would be lost and many, if not all the aerospace related activities would wither and disappear in a relatively short period of time, certainly within about 10 years and the prosperity would go with it.

- Many other local businesses in the immediate and wider area, whether they are in Airbus' supply chain or are secondary or tertiary level businesses, depend on the business environment created and maintained by the airfield.

These businesses are local. They have been developed over the last century around, and depend upon, the aerospace operations based at Filton. They do not have the ability to follow the aerospace businesses to a distant location, as larger companies can. They would either struggle to survive or fail, in which case the thousands of jobs they support would be threatened or disappear, devastating the local economy.

- Filton Airfield already has all the facilities and equipment required and a large enough runway to take even the largest aircraft, which would enable it to accommodate a significant amount of the non-commercial passenger slots e.g. freight and aircraft maintenance and repair from the major South East airports, thereby releasing those spare slots for use by commercial airlines.

It is within the power of local and national government to refuse planning permission for the re-development of Filton Airfield, without which BAE would not be able to sell it for housing at a vast profit. In that event, BAE would almost certainly be more receptive to an offer from another airfield operator.

As the local council has clearly made up its mind in advance to grant development permission, it is up to HMG to act in the national interest and take the decision out of their hands.

This decision is of national significance and goes far beyond consideration of short-term land development profits. Houses can be built at any time and in many other places. A decision made in indecent haste to build houses at Filton will result in the airfield being lost forever. Our proposal also accords with the general tenor of Lord Heseltine's recent report on the importance of Britain's industrial and regional strategy which, in other respects, the Government is evidently taking seriously. There is very little to be lost and much to be gained by a dispassionate consideration by Government, uncompromised by the financial gains from development.

We hope the foregoing points have laid out a convincing case for the Government to act in the national interest and override the local planning decision in order to ensure that Filton Airfield continues as an operational airfield, providing a practical and timely solution to the current capacity crisis.

The political difficulties inherent in airport expansion in and around Greater London have caused the postponement of decisions yet again beyond the date of the next General Election. Our proposal offers an imaginative way of cutting the Gordian knot.

Yours sincerely,

William Dartmouth
South West MEP

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'B Walker', written in a cursive style.

Councillor Ben Walker
South Gloucestershire Councillor for Bradley Stoke

Neil Hamilton
UKIP National Executive Committee

Robert Hindle
Chairman "Save Filton Airfield Campaign"

Public Meeting Attendees
Elm Park Community Centre 02/11/12