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## Murtha's Earmarks Keep Airport Aloft

State-of-the-Art Pennsylvania Facility Sees Few Travelers but Lots of Funding

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JOHNSTOWN, Pa. -- The [John Murtha](#) airport sits on a windy mountain two hours east of Pittsburgh, a 650-acre expanse of smooth tarmac, spacious buildings, a helicopter hangar and a National Guard training center.

Inside the terminal on a recent weekday, four passengers lined up to board a flight, outnumbered by seven security staff members and supervisors, all suited up in gloves and uniforms to screen six pieces of luggage. For three hours that day, no commercial or private planes took off or landed. Three commercial flights leave the airport on weekdays, all bound for Dulles International Airport.

The key to the airport's gleaming facilities -- and, indeed, its continued existence -- is \$200 million in federal funds in the past decade and the powerful patron who steered most of that money here. Rep. John P. Murtha (D-Pa.) is credited with securing at least \$150 million for the airport. It was among the first in the country to win funding from this year's stimulus package: \$800,000 to repave a backup runway.

The facility, newly renamed the John Murtha Johnstown-Cambria County Airport, is a testament to Murtha's ability to tap streams of federal money for pricey, state-of-the-art projects that are rare among regional airports of comparable size.

Murtha, dubbed the King of Pork by critics, consistently directs more federal money to his district than any other congressman -- \$192 million in the 2008 budget. His pattern of steering millions in earmarks to defense contractors who give to his campaign and hire his allies as lobbyists is being scrutinized by the FBI as part of an investigation of a lobbying firm led by one of Murtha's closest friends.

The lawmaker, who uses the airport frequently during his campaigns, has steadily steered millions of taxpayer dollars to it to build a new terminal with a restaurant; a long, concrete runway sturdy enough to handle large jets; and a high-tech radar system usually reserved for international airports.

The airport's passenger count has fallen by more than half in the past 10 years. When Johnstown native Bill Previte arrived on a recent morning, he lamented that his plane was half-empty and that the terminal was deserted.

"Doesn't it seem kind of ridiculous to have a motorized carousel for the baggage claim when 15 people get off the airplane?" he said. "It's obvious: There's not enough population to justify this place."

Murtha, who heads the House Appropriations defense subcommittee, has fought for airport funding as a way to bring jobs to his congressional district, devastated by losses in the steel and coal industries.

Murtha spokesman Matt Mazonkey defended the public spending and said it is unfair to weigh the airport's low volume of passengers against the federal dollars invested in the facility. He noted that several regional airports are confronting the same problem.

"Would we like to have additional commercial flights and business? Absolutely. But you don't attract additional business without having the infrastructure in place to do so," Mazonkey said.

Airport officials said the facility has been a selling point for businesses that are considering locating in Johnstown and praised Murtha's dedication to ensuring air service for the community.

"Mr. Murtha's been a godsend to this airport, no question about it," said airport manager Scott Voelker, who took the job nine months ago. "The economy's been really bad here since the steel mills pulled out. He has a vision for developing this airport and using it to bring businesses into this community."

But a watchdog group on federal waste called the airport a "white elephant."

"It's an exercise in spending more money than sense," said Steve Ellis of Taxpayers for Common Sense.

Federal largess is clearly evident here on Airport Road. Each of the six daily flights that the United Express local carrier

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makes to and from the airport is subsidized, costing taxpayers about \$1.4 million, or \$147 per passenger, last year. The subsidy is double the national average for the federal program designed to guarantee air service for 150 rural communities, excluding those in Alaska.

In addition to the passenger subsidy, the Murtha airport has long received funds from another federal program, meant to help pay for runway improvements and safety at regional airports. The airport has received \$7.3 million since 2004 under the program. Last year, when the number of passengers fell below a federal threshold and the airport's minimum yearly funding was about to drop from \$1 million to \$150,000, Murtha stepped in.

"I strongly believe that the Johnstown Airport should receive the full \$1 M in [airport improvement] funding," Murtha wrote to the Federal Aviation Administration in December. "Without this money, the development of this airport could be significantly inhibited, and the community as a whole could suffer."

The FAA said it could not waive its rules for Murtha, but, a few months later, it approved the stimulus money, which restored the airport's funding close to its previous level. FAA spokeswoman Laura Brown said the Johnstown runway rehabilitation project met the stimulus package's criteria by being shovel-ready and on a state-endorsed priority list.

The project was selected "on its merits and because it met the qualifications for funding," Brown said. "Congressman Murtha did not influence that process."

The airport property is dotted with big-ticket items and buildings funded with Murtha's help.

An \$8 million radar system for detecting weather problems more than 100 miles away spins on the southern edge of the property. Murtha had said that the system would create at least a dozen air traffic control jobs, but the state Air National Guard, which was supposed to staff it, said personnel reductions have left the radar unmanned.

A \$17.8 million earmark in 2006 from the Defense Department replaced the airport's 7,000-foot-long asphalt runway with a reinforced concrete bed capable of handling larger civilian and military jets, but it is not being employed for that purpose.

A \$6.5 million, three-story National Guard and Reserve training center, resembling a rustic ski lodge, is perched on Airport Road.

A new air traffic control tower was built in 1999 for \$6.8 million, after Murtha persuaded Congress to add the project to the federal budget. He also got the funds that year to build the new terminal, where his portrait graces the entrance.

In 1998, at Murtha's urging, the Marine Corps agreed to move a helicopter unit to Johnstown and constructed a \$14 million hangar and training facility at the airport's southeastern edge.

That year, [Sen. John McCain](#) (R-Ariz.) singled out the hangar project on the Senate floor as an example of Congress members' "addiction to pork." He argued that larding up the Defense Department budget with pet projects the Pentagon did not request would hurt the working military.

Voelker, who was in the Air Force for 30 years, was brought in to manage the airport after a rocky period of uneven management. In 2007, the airport authority fired longtime manager Joe McKelvey after he used FAA funds to buy a Chevrolet Tahoe SUV to use at the airport. The FAA had initially approved the expense for a safety vehicle on the property, but other agency managers later questioned it.

The same day, over some members' objections, the authority hired MTT Aviation Services. The company is a subsidiary of Mountaintop Technologies, a defense contractor that had received at least \$23 million in earmarks from Murtha since 2001 and is run by his close friend. The subsidiary was formed to handle fuel sales and other services at the airport shortly before its role was expanded to airport manager.

MTT hired a lobbying firm that had one of Murtha's former staffers as a lead lobbyist and had once employed Murtha's brother.

Some members complained that MTT had no airport management experience and was a tenant at the airport, creating a conflict of interest.

Although some local residents and business leaders praise the convenience of the commuter flights, others note the airport's liabilities: Tickets can cost hundreds more than they do when flying out of a bigger city, and Johnstown's mountaintop location can force frequent cancellations in winter.

United Express's local carrier, Colgan Air, and the authority are running radio and television ads to encourage locals to use the airport, citing its convenience: By connecting Johnstown to Dulles, locals can get to 390 other cities without driving to Pittsburgh.

"And, listen, now the parking is free!" booms an announcer in a radio advertisement. "It's your connection to the world: the John P. Murtha Johnstown-Cambria Airport."

Researcher Julie Tate and research editor Alice Crites contributed to this report.

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