

# **Email Poll of Senate Constituents on Improving Travel to and from the Houghton County Memorial Airport (CMX) (February 1, 2015)**

## **1. Original Request for Suggestions**

On December 15, a Senate constituent pointed out the frequent travel problems caused by cancelled flights arriving at or departing from the Houghton County Memorial Airport (HCMA) and asked if the Senate could urge the Administration to work with the appropriate authorities to see what might be done to alleviate such problems.

On December 23, the lead story in the *Daily Mining Gazette* reported that an article in Quartz had named HCMA number one in delays, with only 53.77% of flights arriving on time <http://www.mininggazette.com/page/content.detail/id/540124.html>

The Quartz piece, “There’s nearly a 50% chance you’ll be late if you fly into these US airports,” was based on data from the U.S. Department of Transportation <http://qz.com/313040/theres-nearly-a-50-chance-youll-be-late-if-you-fly-into-these-us-airports/>

In response to this article, the author of a January 3 letter to the editor said that in addition to poor weather, lack of radar contributes to the frequent delays. <http://www.mininggazette.com/page/content.detail/id/540378/Weather-not-only-reason-for-delay.html?nav=5093>

## **What is Michigan Tech Doing to Help?**

Provost Max Seel is the officially designated Administration representative to the University Senate. When Senate officers asked him about this problem during a January 19 meeting, he said that the Administration is already working to improve this situation.

Nevertheless, as two-time Nobel Laureate Linus Pauling said, “The best way to get a good idea is to get a lot of ideas.” Hence, we suggested to Max that we would poll Senate constituents to see what suggestions they might have.

## **What Do You Think?**

Thus far, just in casual conversation, the following ideas have been suggested:

1. Create an electronic bulletin board on which Tech students and employees could post information about rides.
2. Make motor-pool vehicles available (perhaps including a driver) to shuttle stranded Tech faculty, staff, and students to and from regional airports (Marquette, Green Bay, Rhinelander, etc.).

3. Work with local and regional private, transportation companies to coordinate such services.
4. Encourage HCMA to add, replace, or upgrade related equipment.
5. Work with the FAA to restore direct flights to and from Detroit.

If you have other ideas about what Michigan Tech might do to help alleviate this problem—perhaps in cooperation with other area employers, such as Finlandia, Portage Health, and Aspirus—please send them to me. I'll compile these suggestions and pass them along to Max for the Administration's consideration.

## **2. Editing and Summary of Responses**

Responses have been edited for brevity, redundancy, typos, etc.

Although no one requested anonymity, responses have also been edited to protect anonymity (for example, by removing names, changing “husband” or “wife” to “spouse,” and changing specific references to country of origin to “international”).

A number of people commented on the significance of this issue for Michigan Tech's success as an institution:

“I can't agree more that it's important to Tech generally. The lack of reliable transportation in our area can only hurt our institution increasingly over time.”

“The travel factor was very important to international faculty. It is very difficult and expensive to fly home out of this area.”

“I consider the state of air transportation in our location to be the number one detriment to our professional environment. . . . Just as negative is the impression we leave with university visitors.”

“This challenge is probably one of the greatest ones we have. The cost and unreliability of flights is really becoming a major obstacle for growing our ‘business.’”

“This is a big issue that has impacted my productivity significantly in many instances and is directly linked to retention considerations.”

Radar, it seems, is not a significant issue. However, one suggestion was that HCMA hire a qualified weather observer, which might help to reduce cancellations caused by the ASOS (Automated Surface Observing System).

Other than that, most of the suggestions that people offered (please see below) have to do with things that are beyond the control of the airport manager, including the following:

- The location of the airport.
- The weather.
- Ground transportation, including lack of one-way rental arrangements with National Car Rental
- Better promotion of Stuck Huskies.
- Practices, resources, and policies of United Airlines and Sky West.
- Lack of direct flights to Detroit and/or Minneapolis.

Nevertheless, HCMA Manager Dennis Hext has offered to discuss ideas for improving transportation to and from the airport during a Senate meeting this semester.

### 3. Individual Responses

It would be great to have more statistics on the following:

1. Flight service record when HCMA was served via Minneapolis and Detroit. Did we have fewer late or cancelled flights (in percentage)?
2. Flight service records of other regional airports that have snowy weather like HCMA.
3. The late-flight percentage for CMX during summer.

All these would help to find out if delays and cancellations are due to (1) a UA/ORD problem, (2) technology, or (3) weather (snow, ice, fog, etc.).

\*\*\*\*\*

I always thought it would be helpful if Husky Motors had a few parking spots (and cars) near ORD. Stranded ORD passengers would have a vehicle to drive home. You'd need some online communication tool as mentioned above. It also would enable people to drive to ORD if they were stranded with no flights out of CMX and park for someone else's next trip back.

Number one seems to be to get good radar and weather info at CMX.

\*\*\*\*\*

Regarding an electronic bulletin board for rides, the Facebook group called "Stuck Huskies" does just that, as well as provides a venue for information sharing on cancelled flights and meeting up with others at O'Hare to carpool up. It has roughly 600 members, but it's a public group, so you don't have to join to read it. Publicizing it in Tech Today would make it work better: [https://www.facebook.com/groups/559930334051822/?ref=br\\_tf](https://www.facebook.com/groups/559930334051822/?ref=br_tf)

I would say that a huge barrier is the unwillingness of National to rent one way from either end (Houghton or O'Hare), even though it is highly unlikely that the cars will pile up at one end (just as many folks get stuck up here as down there). If we could get them to relax this policy, that would help tremendously.

\*\*\*\*\*

Work with United Airlines to provide alternatives and funding. When we had Northwest and Delta, they would accommodate us by putting on us on other flights, sometimes with other airlines. I remember coming back from Mexico and having to go part of my flight with American Airlines to Marquette. My [spouse] had to pick me up, but it beat the other alternative of not getting home. Because we are the only UP airport with United as service, that poses even more problems because United refuses to book you on Delta or American Airline flights to closer airports. The closest you can get to here is Wausau or Green Bay.

United Airlines is a big part of the problem. Why don't they rent a bus when a plane can't fly in here? They would probably make money because some of the fares are ridiculous. They are rude and not helpful in Chicago. It is on par with the place we have to board and deplane going outside where it is disgustingly dirty and noisy. What a way to treat your customers!

It is also the airport manager's responsibility to make sure his equipment is maintained and not blame it on the FAA. . . .

The Houghton County Commissioners need to look at other alternatives too.

I personally have gone to Rhinelander twice this year to fly instead of flying out of here. One time it was only to go to Minneapolis no less.

The first step would be to work with United Airlines for a backup plan instead of making the customer find alternate arrangements or expending more university dollars when it is a private company causing the problems. It is more than just the weather. I don't travel as much, but the few times I did not leave was because of mechanical problems with the airplane and a higher incidence than before United. In the case of traveling to a conference, then you can't go because you can't get out of here for several days.

In fact, I have started booking flights with Orbitz because if there is an issue and you need to get a refund, Orbitz processes it right away and not weeks later.

My suggestion is to form a committee to come up with an action plan and implement it. I would be more than happy serve on such a committee.

\*\*\*\*\*

Flying was better and more on time in my personal experience with a connection in and out of Minneapolis. It not just the weather and HCMA equipment. I have been stuck in Chicago

because United lost the airplane. It was mistakenly taken to a hanger rather than to the flight line. Couple of hours lost there and the rerouting of the entire trip. Once I reported to HCMA to discover that all of my itinerary was cancelled, both the flight out and the flights back a week later. The records show United called me, but no missed call was logged on my cell phone to their number. Flights in and out often appear to have fewer seats than passengers. So there are layovers in Chicago.

So I fear United operations is part of the issue.

\*\*\*\*\*

A shuttle of some kind seems truly necessary.

\*\*\*\*\*

I can't agree more that it's important to Tech generally. The lack of reliable transportation in our area can only hurt our institution increasingly over time, particularly in light of our 2035 institutional goals.

Your number 5 suggests working on getting back direct flights to Detroit. Another possible direct flight option would be to Minneapolis. Although it might not be as leveraged as Detroit flights, being able to fly directly to Minneapolis in addition to Chicago would be a quantum leap improvement in our air service.

\*\*\*\*\*

I am curious if you have any data for when we had Northwest/Delta and went to Minneapolis?

I don't know about how much of the delays and cancellations are the local airport as much as it is Chicago. I never had a cell phone before getting tired of being stuck in Chicago, and now I pay \$75 a month for a phone purchased and used almost exclusively because of O'Hare. (I just don't need or want a phone always on me but at O'Hare I need it and email because of the delays and cancellations).

I much prefer Minneapolis over Detroit but I think anything to avoid O'Hare is good.

\*\*\*\*\*

I can't but thinking that the FAA won't restore the flight from CMX to Detroit, rather the airline would need to.

Why not charter a plane service? Have it run from Houghton to Detroit on Monday morning and from Detroit to Houghton on Friday afternoon. Rather than deadheading, folks could hop on from Detroit to Houghton for a red eye and then from Houghton to Detroit for the weekend.

Had the chance to charter a plane for a project downstate and the cost came to less than \$500 per

head.

Now this won't help with the radar situation, but both Marquette and Iron Mountain have airports that are much further inland and thus not as susceptible to poor visibility for takeoff and approach.

The downside to this is that our quaint little airport may not survive the reduction in service-- United already receives a subsidy from the feds to operate here and if we strip a significant portion of their business, it may lead to this leg being cancelled. Of course, that means the University should have a degree of leverage of it.

\*\*\*\*\*

While there are a number of variables that affect our air service the one no one seems to mention is the location of the airport. I recently read in the newspaper that the county is considering upgrading the airport terminal. Now is the time to ask: should the airport be moved to southern Houghton county? My bet is that there is no political incentive to even consider this question, even though moving the airport might make sense.

I won't hold my breath because re-locating would be so expensive. It is, however, and best solution to the problem because I doubt whether radar would solve the problem totally. The pilots still need to see the ground to land.

\*\*\*\*\*

Last year when we were discussing the possible connection between benefits cuts and faculty turnover, an international Engineering faculty member whom I know left Tech. He said that the benefits reductions were definitely a factor, due to the fact they had started a family while at Tech, but he also mentioned that the travel factor was very important to international faculty. It is very difficult and expensive to fly home out of this area.

\*\*\*\*\*

Items 4 and 5 on your list are very important to me.

\*\*\*\*\*

I don't see among the suggestions any one that addresses the following cause pointed out in the Mining Gazette letter: "in addition to poor weather, lack of radar contributes to the frequent delays." Although I don't know about the options or limitations (cost etc.) involved in dealing with the radar issue, it would seem to me that working with HCMA for, lobbying federal authorities for, diverting some Michigan Tech funds towards, etc. getting a radar installed would be a desirable option.

\*\*\*\*\*

The first suggestion that I have is to talk with Dennis Hext (the Airport manager) to get better data concerning the reasons for delays and cancelled flights. I talked with Dennis and he said he would be happy to discuss this problem and solutions with you. As a pilot who flies IFR (Instrument Flight Rules) out of CMX in the winter, I am aware that lack of radar is rarely a cause of a delay. If lack of radar causes a delay, this delay will only be a few minutes. So adding radar will not improve flying into CMX. Getting someone at the airport qualified as a weather observer may help with cancellations caused by the ASOS (Automated Surface Observing System). This system being down caused a number of cancellations this past year. Anyway, Dennis is aware of these things and you should consult with him before spending a lot of time developing ideas in an information vacuum.

\*\*\*\*\*

I certainly agree that this is a problem, and I think part of the problem is Chicago and United Airlines as well as Houghton's weather. I travel out of Iron Mountain or Marquette unless Chicago is my destination. Minneapolis/ St. Paul or Detroit are much better connecting airports, and they are Delta hubs. Ideally it would be nice to have two competing airlines serving CMX, but I doubt that there are enough customers for that. Thus I suggest that the next time the contract for service to Houghton comes up that it is switched from United to Delta with flights to both MSP and DTW. I understand the contract is open for renewal every two years, and the most recent consideration was last year. At that time a public hearing was held, and the majority of attendees wanted to switch back to Delta, one of the competitors, but United was chosen.

\*\*\*\*\*

I strongly support this effort of the Senate. I consider the state of air transportation in our location to be the number one detriment to our professional environment. I estimate that in my research group alone we had extra travel costs of well over \$1000 in the last year due to extra expenses (hotels, one-way car rentals, etc.), and that does not count the much higher cost in loss of productivity (missed talks at professional meetings, missed course lectures, etc.). Just as negative is the impression we leave with university visitors: in the last year in my research group we had three international visitors stranded in Chicago on three separate occasions, two coming from Germany, one from The Netherlands. One of them never made it to Michigan Tech, and he wrote me light heartedly that he felt like he was in a scene from the movie The Terminal.

In addition to my support, I share the following thoughts:

United/Sky West seems very quick to cancel flights to Houghton/Hancock due to poor weather conditions. A United employee in Chicago remarked to a stranded international visitor of mine last summer that CMX is always one of the first flights to be cancelled when there are weather delays... even if the trouble is not in Houghton/Hancock. He stated that it is because they get paid in part for the flight whether it arrives or not, due to the federal subsidy. I was intrigued to know if this is indeed true. The text below is taken from the Department of Transportation page describing the Essential Air Service subsidy to rural airports. CMX has a subsidy of about \$100k/year. Please take particular note of the last sentence:

The Department pays the carriers in arrears on a per-flight-completed basis. At the end of each month, carriers submit claims for the prior month based on the number of flights that it actually completed in conformance with the contract. Carriers submit invoices, detailing the service actually completed, including date of service, aircraft type, routing, and frequency of service, and any actual variations from the service contemplated by the contract. When a carrier is forced by operational exigencies to make ad hoc service adjustments to its service -- aircraft type or routing -- the carrier reports those deviations on its invoice and appropriate adjustments are made. For instance, if the carrier substituted a smaller, less expensive aircraft type than agreed to, perhaps because the larger aircraft had a mechanical problem, the subsidy rate would be reduced accordingly. On the other hand, **we typically pay carriers for flights that could not be completed because of weather conditions. [Emphasis added.]**

Source: <http://www.dot.gov/policy/aviation-policy/small-community-rural-air-service/essential-air-service>

\*\*\*\*\*

Another idea is that Michigan Tech could negotiate a deal with National Rental Car, similar to what other universities do. There are incredible discounts available and even deals where they WOULD give us a car one-way from Green Bay, etc. I know because I still have the University of Wisconsin “deal” attached to my National rewards card and it allows me to rent vehicles for business at MUCH reduced rates and get one-way cars, etc. without questions asked. I’m not supposed to do this because I no longer work for UW, but it is hard to resist.

I think having this option would go a long way toward helping conditions and it may not be much cost to university. National benefits as well with the increase in numbers of rentals.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was one of the stranded travelers during a trip to and from San Diego January 19-22. On the outbound leg, Houghton Airport cancelled my flight due to severe weather here in Houghton (lake effect). I had to rent a car one way to Duluth to make my meeting. That added \$300 to my travel. Then on the return, again weather in Houghton did not allow the Chicago to Houghton flight to land. We turned back at midnight to Chicago. On that flight, weather was good right up to arriving in Houghton. Again, lake effect with less than 1/4 mile visibility. I booked a flight to Green Bay and repeated the one way rental to Houghton. The airport in Houghton is located in one of the worst lake effect regions in the UP, so it is not surprising that cancellations often happen. Had the airport been located south of Houghton rather than north of it, perhaps we would not be having this discussion. The further south you get from the lake the better the weather is even during lake effect events.

\*\*\*\*\*

This challenge is probably one of the greatest ones we have. The cost and unreliability of flights

is really becoming a major obstacle for growing our “business.” One of the most challenging things is getting stuck in Chicago, especially when rental car companies won’t rent cars to get back here. No way home....literally.

There’s no question in my mind that the one thing that should be looked at would be the potential shuttle services to other airports. I would have no problem taking a flight from Green Bay, if I didn’t have to drive there, and I bet the savings in flights costs would cover the cost of running a shuttle.

I would recommend a student study (one of the enterprises) that would develop an operational plan and cost estimate for running a shuttle service down to Green Bay...or somewhere else. One key piece of information they ought to know would be the number of flights taken by Michigan Tech employees, etc. ....but also by visitors who come here. I’d love to know, how big % of all CMX flights are directly related to Tech.

Finally, there should be a “Tech Lost in Translation” forum, where people who get stuck in Chicago could try to coordinate alternative means of getting back to Houghton (renting a car, etc.).

\*\*\*\*\*

This is a big issue that has impacted my productivity significantly in many instances and is directly linked to retention considerations. My [spouse] relies heavily on air traffic to travel for business. It simply is not acceptable to put important meetings on the line with flight cancellations and delays on a regular basis. In other words, air traffic impacts not only the university but also anyone trying to conduct business outside of the local vicinity. If reliability of air transportation could be significantly improved, there is an ability to accommodate many more creative work arrangements for trailing dual career spouses

I think it is imperative that radar equipment be installed to allow instrumentation landings rather than just sight landings. There needs to be redundancy in equipment and/or parts so when something fails it can be fixed quickly (not in numerous days).

There is a significant burden on grant travel budgets for unforeseen circumstances. There should be a pot of money to help elevate the hardship this can cause. For instance, a recent trip ended up costing significantly more than budgeted due to flight cancelations and the need to come up with alternative plans. In last minute desperation to get to important professional commitments when travel plans have been canceled, cost is often the last consideration. As a consequence, I will not be able to afford travel for that project to get to other equally important meetings, reducing the university’s visibility and recognition.

\*\*\*\*\*

I think the idea of some University sponsored ride share site is a good one. It wouldn’t take much to administer. As far as I know, all we have now is the Facebook page for Stuck Huskies, which I have not found useful. If people were willing to register that they are flying out and then, the

flight is cancelled, it would be easy to make a decision about transportation to Green Bay or someplace. Suppose there are 8 Michigan Tech people trying to get out in the morning. The flight is cancelled at midnight. Those 8 could have the option to get in a University vehicle, driven by a student (?) the next morning for a flight out of Green Bay. I really don't think it would be very expensive to operate this kind of program. And if compared to all the lost time and lost productivity, I think it would be worth it. Naturally, something similar could be worked out for return trips.

I also think someone should look into how all these cancellations affect Skywest/United. If it doesn't hurt them financially, nothing will change. They need an incentive to try to get these flights in. Maybe the only way to get a change is to stop flying from that airport.

One other thought. Although the air service is usually late, and while I have been extremely frustrated with cancelled flights, we are fortunate to have an airport just 10-15 minutes from campus. Most people in major cities are not as close to their airport. And we don't have to deal with long security lines either. So it isn't all bad.

\*\*\*\*\*

I have a couple suggestions. Most passengers focus on United airline operations, because most flight cancellations and delays are not related to weather—they result from operations. However the operator is NOT United, it is SkyWest. They have operations decisions that work against flights getting to CMX.

Their fleet of small jets is too thin for their demands, which means they run short of planes. Their crews are also too tightly committed, so crew are often short. With both of these problems, the fact that our second flight is nearly the last small jet to leave ORD each day means that our chances for cancellation are enhanced significantly. Other commuter airlines such as the ones that serve Green Bay and Appleton do not have nearly as dire crew and plane shortages. This could be a key to solving this problem. My sense is that we need to address this problem with more thought as to the root cause.

I also feel that flight service into the MSP hub would address out travel needs well. Weather is more often different with respect to ORD than DTW, so flights that get weather cancellation in ORD are more likely to have better weather in MSP than DTW. And most travelers from Michigan Tech are not going to DTW. Hope this helps. It is good to work on this.

\*\*\*\*\*

I don't know if this helps much, but you can get a bus in Milwaukee at the Amtrak station everyday at 9:30 p.m. and get to Houghton at about 8:30 a.m. You can get out of Houghton at 11:45 p.m. and arrive in Milwaukee at around 8:30 a.m. This might be better than being stranded, or renting a car and driving all night if stranded in Milwaukee or Green Bay, Marquette or Houghton.

I have used the bus from and to Houghton for decades. But I suppose many people would not

consider a bus.

<http://www.dot.wi.gov/travel/rail/docs/amtrakmap.pdf>

<http://www.amtrak.com/midwest-train-bus-stations>

Anyhow, I use the Amtrak thruway bus and train ticket (Indian Trails) to go from the Milwaukee Amtrak station to Chicago and then all over the USA and back. Of course, the train takes a longer time, but for me, it has always been reliable, never been stranded.

Maybe if people don't know about this, it is an option.

\*\*\*\*\*

Restore direct flights to Minneapolis.

Divert flights that can't land here to Marquette (or other nearby city) instead of back to Chicago or Green Bay.

An apartment in Chicago to stay when stranded.

Require airlines to get you to the actually place listed on your ticket rather than offer to take you to Traverse City (really!) instead. Northwest used to hire a bus from Marquette or Minneapolis, not strand you in some random place.

Establish a StuckHusky twitter tag to link stranded travelers.

Resolve the problem of renting a car one way from Chicago to Houghton.

Re-establish train service to Houghton. (I'm told there used to be an overnight train to Chicago.)

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Responses received after February 16, 2015**

Here is an idea that should be relatively easy to implement.

To alleviate the stress and expense of ORD-stranded passengers, I think Michigan Tech should work out good discount deals with the Airport Hilton for overnight stays and possibly with the Sky Clubs for temporary stays. These would, for example, at least provide our employees wifi computer access and an environment where they could work. One could consider other accommodations, even renting/purchasing something (a Michigan Tech hostel), but in my experience you save a tremendous amount of time if when stranded you immediately book with the Airport Hilton if you can at the stranded-passenger rate.

I don't know why the Sky clubs are ridiculously expensive, and I don't understand why ORD

does not have free wifi, when many, many airport hubs do. But Michigan Tech ought to be able to negotiate a group rate with something in Chicago with convenient access to ORD.

\*\*\*\*\*

A group of us did rent a van one-way to Houghton from Green Bay about a month ago.

\*\*\*\*\*

Back when the transition was made from Delta to United, there was a discussion about what carrier Michigan Tech wanted to service HCMA. As I understood it at the time, Delta would have continued operating two flights (33-seat SAABs) per day in and out of Houghton to Minneapolis. United was proposing the two 50-seat jets we have today. The administration was pro-maximum seats per day out of HCMA, regardless of destination. Conventional wisdom was that whatever carrier Michigan Tech (undoubtedly the largest customer) wanted, that was going to be the choice. So, Michigan Tech is partly to blame for the mess we now have.

If Delta had continued flying the smaller planes here and they were always full, then market conditions would prevail, and if they thought it would make sense, they'd add an additional flight or send in bigger aircraft (they, too, have 50-seat RJ's). I'd like to see a statistic for how much money this decision has cost the university...my guess is it would be staggering, considering the rental car charges, overnight hotel stays, per diem, etc., every time a flight is delayed or canceled altogether.

Another aspect of it is the alternate airport issue. Delta services Marquette, Rhinelander, and Iron Mountain, I think. These are all airports within roughly a 2-3 hour drive that could service a diverted flight in case of weather. United's closest are Green Bay, Wausau, and Duluth, and rarely do they use these as alternates. Most of the time it's back to O'Hare.

Speaking of O'Hare, why would we choose to fly in and out of the busiest airport in the world when there are other alternatives? I flew just as much when Delta was here as I do now with United, and my travel is much worse with United, no question.

My suggestion is whatever Michigan Tech can do to get rid of United up here the better. Regardless of why the service is so suspect here. United is not going to change their ways, and the sooner Delta comes back the better off we'll be.

\*\*\*\*\*

The last two times I flew from HCMA (9 months apart) I was delayed due to weather instrument problems. Both times resulted in missed connecting flights and stays overnight in Chicago. Waste of my time. Luckily I purchased trip insurance so I didn't lose that much money on the deal. Last time they said they sent someone for training but they took the test and it hadn't been graded???? Might actually waste less time by driving to Mqt or Rhinelander to fly (based on my last two trips).