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Inspector General Questions Value of Some Airport Stimulus Projects

By MICHAEL COOPER
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A \$14.7 million stimulus project to replace an airport on a remote island in Alaska was one of several airport stimulus projects that were questioned in [an advisory issued last week](#) by the inspector general of the Transportation Department. The airport averages only 42 flights a month.



The New York Times

Two remote airports in Alaska are receiving over \$28 million.

The advisory found that the Federal Aviation Administration had awarded \$38.5 million to low-priority airport projects of questionable economic merit, and that it had awarded \$15 million more to four airports whose operators had been cited in the past for trouble managing federal grants. The aviation agency selected the projects as part of a \$1.1 billion stimulus program for improving airports around the nation.

Two of the airports the inspector general cited were in Alaska. The \$14.7 million project calls for replacing the airport in [Ouzinkie](#), a village of around 170 people, mostly of Russian Aleut ancestry, located on an island about 12 miles north of Kodiak. The second calls for spending

\$13.9 million to replace the airport in [Akiachak, a remote Yup'ik Eskimo village](#) in western Alaska with a population of around 660.

The advisory said they were among several low-priority airport projects that were selected in part because the [F.A.A.](#) wanted to "ensure widespread geographic distribution of funds," even though that was not a requirement of the stimulus law, the advisory found.

The agency has a system to assign priority rankings to airport projects. Usually projects must score at least 41 out of 100 to qualify for airport improvement funds. But the administration set a higher goal for its stimulus money, prioritizing projects that scored 62 or higher. The two Alaskan airport projects each scored only 40, the inspector general found.

The Department of Transportation defended the choice of projects, saying that the

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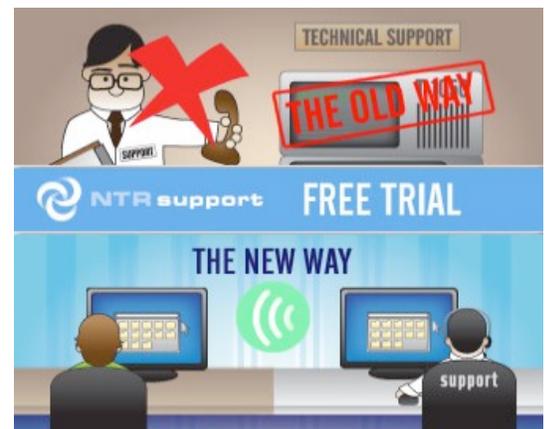


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Alaskan airports qualified for the money under safety provisions of the law and that both villages would be extremely isolated without safe air travel.

“These projects provide airstrips that meet minimum safety standards for the citizens of these Alaskan towns,” Deputy Transportation Secretary John D. Porcari wrote in a [response](#) to the department’s inspector general, Calvin L. Scovel III.

The inspector general’s report came a month after [ProPublica and CBS News](#) reported that more than \$100 million of the airport improvement money was being spent on airports with fewer than one flight an hour. The inspector general — who also questioned awards to four airports in Delaware, Missouri, Ohio and Washington that did not provide commercial passenger service and had limited flight operations — recommended that the aviation administration should either show that the projects had economic merit or consider withdrawing the grants.

The inspector general plans to conduct a full audit of the program.

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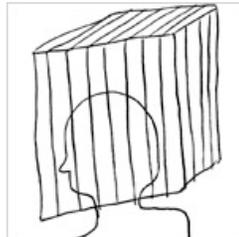
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