

New Englanders are fighting against new infrastructure for carbon-intensive billionaire travel. If they win, the significance could be global.

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In 1775, the first battle of the American Revolution was in Massachusetts on Lexington Green, known as the “shot heard round the world.”

Three miles away, at an airport known as Hanscom Field, climate activists are launching what might be the newest shot to ring across a warming planet: No new private jet infrastructure.

Located 14 miles outside Boston, Hanscom is New England’s largest private jet port. Private jets are the epitome of private excess at public and planetary expense. They pollute between 10 and 20 times more per passenger than commercial flights.

Yet private developers are pressing to triple Hanscom’s capacity to serve wealthy private jet travelers. So after a summer of unprecedented heat waves, wildfires, floods, and droughts, climate activists are demanding a halt to private jet expansion at Hanscom — and everywhere else.

A new study I co-authored, Hanscom High Flyers, found 31,599 flights by 2,915 unique private jets in or out of Hanscom over an 18-month period. Together these flights emitted *106,676 tons* of carbon. (For comparison, the average Massachusetts resident has a carbon footprint of about 8 tons all year. For the average American, it’s about 14.)

Private jet owners and users are among the wealthiest people in our society. According to Wealth-X, the median wealth of a U.S. private jet owner is \$190 million, with fractional share owners worth about \$140 million.

Despite their ample means, these high flyers don't pay the full ecological and economic costs of their luxury transit choice. In addition to its disproportionate climate impact, private aviation uses 16 percent of the country's airspace — but only contributes 2 percent of the fees to manage the flight control system.

There's a reason Warren Buffett once nicknamed his private jet "[the Indefensible](#)."

Defenders of private jet excess argue they're necessary for senior management mobility and the health of our economy. But we estimate that at least half of Hanscom flights (49 percent) went to luxury destinations or were for recreational purposes.

The number one frequent Hanscom flyer was a jet registered to the private equity firm Charlesbank, a major [investor in fossil fuel infrastructure](#) projects. Their number one destination was Nantucket, with 112 flights. Traveling from [Boston to Nantucket](#) is a two-hour drive and a one-hour high speed ferry. Charlesbank also made 100 trips to two private jet ports outside New York, a destination with dozens of other transit options — many of them quite luxurious, [including First Class](#) trips on the Acela fast train.

Other frequent destinations included West Palm Beach, Florida; Aspen, Colorado; Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and international destinations like Aruba and the Virgin Islands. While plenty of business is no doubt discussed over golf at Aberdeen, Scotland or at bird hunting reserves in Argentina — destinations we also documented — this is probably the least defensible form of luxury travel on a warming planet when a Zoom call would often do.

Our analysis only reveals the tip of the private jet excess iceberg. Thanks to industry lobbying, private jet owners can have their flight data removed from public flight tracking registries.

We found that several Massachusetts billionaires who own private jets — including Red Sox and *Boston Globe* owner John Henry, Patriots owner Bob Kraft, New Balance owner Jim Davis, and former Reebok CEO Paul Fireman— had blocked the public from seeing their private flight records. And [the private jet lobby wants to make it even harder for the public to get this information.](#)

The private jet lobby argues that private aviation creates jobs and insists that they're investing in [sustainable aviation fuels](#). But typewriter manufacturing created a lot of jobs too at one time — and replacing jet fuel with alternatives is still [decades away, if ever](#). We would be better off investing in high-speed rail and other transit alternatives, which would create good jobs, serve more people, and reduce pollution.

So the Hanscom fight has national and even global significance. European governments are cracking down on short hop flights and exploring bans on private jet expansion.

In the United States, the politically powerful private jet lobby is used to getting its way with state governments. But in Massachusetts, Governor Maura Healy has [been a leader](#) in facing the realities of climate change. Even Massport, the typically private jet-friendly public agency that operates Hanscom Field, Boston Logan airport, and other facilities, is implementing [plans to move to net zero emissions](#) in their buildings and infrastructure by 2031.

In a compact Northeast corridor with many other transportation options, local officials may well get the message on private jets — and that could set the stage for successful fights elsewhere.

If activists succeed in stopping the Hanscom expansion, it will be the next “shot heard round the world” on a warming planet.

Chuck Collins directs the Program on Inequality at the Institute for Policy Studies and co-edits its [Inequality.org](#) website. He's a coauthor of the new IPS report [Hansom High Flyers: Private Jet Excess Doesn't Justify Airport Expansion](#).