

Plan to expand hangar space for private jets at Hanscom sparks concerns about a surge in climate pollution

By [David Abel](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 20, 2023, 3:54 p.m.



A jet takes off at Hanscom Field in Bedford. Massport is considering a controversial proposal to build 27 new hangars there. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

BEDFORD — They're among the most polluting forms of transportation on the planet, catering mainly to the wealthy and powerful, and in recent years, their use has soared at airports such as Hanscom Field.

Over the past 30 years, the number of private jets flying to or from New England's largest noncommercial airport has more than quadrupled, and their numbers are expected to increase in the coming years.

To accommodate the growing demand, the Massachusetts Port Authority, which operates Hanscom, is considering a controversial proposal to build 27 new hangars — significantly increasing the amount of space to park private jets at the airport in this suburb northwest of Boston.



Aircraft on the tarmac at Hanscom Field.DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The plan has sparked heavy criticism from neighbors, local officials, state lawmakers, and environmental advocates, who say it enables a reckless ramping up of emissions at a time when state law requires they be cut by half of 1990 levels by the end of the decade. They also say it would make it harder for Massport to honor its pledge to effectively eliminate its carbon emissions in the coming years.

“It’s just crazy,” said Nina Hackel, 62, who lives about a mile from the airport in Concord. “Why are we doing this? Why are we promoting all of this incredibly polluting air travel for the uber rich when we have a major climate problem? It doesn’t make sense.”

Massport officials say the proposal is a response to existing demand for hangars at Hanscom, as well as a means of maximizing revenue and complying with federal requirements to provide transportation services to the public. They also question whether the hangars will result in increased private jet traffic.

Environmental advocates argue the state shouldn't authorize any project that could boost transportation emissions, which account for about 43 percent of all greenhouse gases produced in Massachusetts. Aviation is the source of nearly 7 percent of the state's emissions.

Private jets emit on average about 10 times more carbon pollution per passenger than commercial jets, and their emissions far exceed other forms of transportation, according to [a report](#) this month by the Institute for Policy Studies, a left-leaning think tank in Washington, D.C.

On shorter flights, the carbon footprint of private jets can be even greater. Flights from New York to Washington, D.C., on private jets are responsible for about 45 times the emissions per passenger of commercial planes flying the same route, and more than 1,100 times the emissions per passenger of train travel to those cities, the report estimated.



A jet flying over Hanscom after takeoff.DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Private jet flights have surged in North America, home to more than [two-thirds](#) of the world's fleet. Last year, there were an [estimated 2.8 million private jet flights](#) on the continent — accounting for more than half of all such flights in the world. That represents an 11 percent rise over 2021 and 18

percent more than before the pandemic began, in 2019, according to [WINGX](#), a German company that tracks air traffic.

In the same period, private jet sales have also surged, with [Gulfstream Aerospace](#), a leading private jet manufacturer, [reporting](#) record sales.

If private jet travel continues to grow at the same rate as in recent years, those jets would produce 940 megatons of greenhouse gasses over the next three years in the United States — equivalent to the emissions produced by 65 million cars during the same period, according to [a study](#) in the journal *Transportation Research Interdisciplinary Perspectives*.

“It’s the ultimate expression of environmental injustice to allow a small number of people to pollute in such an unconstrained way,” said Neil Rasmussen, president of Save Our Heritage, a historic preservation group in Concord, and a vocal critic of Hanscom’s plan to increase the number of hangars. “This is just wrong, and we have to stop it. Otherwise, there’s no explaining it to our grandchildren.”

The prospect of Massport adding nearly a half-million square feet of new hangar space, as well as 175 new parking spaces for cars, has also rankled state lawmakers who live in the area, including state Senator Michael Barrett, a Lexington Democrat and a principal author of the state’s landmark climate law. Massport officials could not say how much space is now reserved for private jets, but they said about 900,000 square feet of hangar space is used for “corporate activity,” which includes a variety of aircraft, including many smaller propeller planes.

In a letter in February to Massport, Barrett called the proposal “profoundly disturbing” and noted the irony of it, given the quasi-public agency’s [pledge to become carbon neutral by 2031](#).

Last year, Massport, which also operates Logan Airport, Flynn Cruiseport Boston, and the Paul W. Conley Container Terminal, vowed to spend \$1 billion to effectively eliminate carbon emissions generated by its buildings and equipment. But the agency can’t do much to reduce the far greater amounts of carbon pollution produced by the aircraft that operate at its airports, which are mainly beyond their authority to regulate.



Jets taxied on the runway at Hanscom.DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

“If the [hangar] project goes forward as the developers envision, we fear Massport’s sustainability efforts elsewhere will net out to very little in the way of reduced emissions, and possibly to nothing at all,” wrote Barrett, whose letter was co-signed by more than 30 other local residents and officials. “Pollution attributable to traffic at the new Hanscom hangars threatens to cancel out all the gains.”

Barrett urged Massport officials to reimagine the proposal and require all new hangers to house fossil fuel-free aircraft, such as the [75 electric airplanes](#) that Cape Air ordered last year from a Washington company called [Eviation](#).

“We urge you, in the strongest possible terms, to ensure that Massachusetts does not enable super-emitters,” he wrote.

Massport officials said it’s premature to conclude that the additional hangars would result in more emissions; they say they’re awaiting the results of a state-mandated environmental impact report due out this fall.

And they suggested the project could actually curb emissions, as it aims to reduce the number of so-called ferry flights from airports with sufficient hangar space — flights that often arrive or depart without passengers. They

said there are about 30 aircraft on waiting lists for hangar space at Hanscom, and dozens of others that only park there when space is available.

“Due to the fact that the development will largely house existing users and, in some cases, reduce ferry flights, it is not assumed that there will be a resulting increase in carbon emissions,” said Sharon Williams, Massport’s director of Hanscom.

Williams said Massport has a legal obligation to generate revenue to be “as self-sustaining as possible” and “an economic engine” for the state, adding the airport has an annual economic impact of more than \$679 million and supports more than 2,200 jobs. Massport officials said they’re still negotiating the price for leasing the land for the hangars.

Williams said the airport’s federal grants wouldn’t allow Massport to ban fossil fuel jets at Hanscom, which is a federally designated reliever of congestion at Logan.

“We cannot prohibit a type of aircraft or aeronautical use,” Williams said. “We have to make the airport available to all.”

A representative of the Norwood-based developers who proposed building the hangars, North Airfield Ventures and Runway Realty Ventures, insisted the new hangars are necessary and that they’ll be climate friendly.

“The strong economy in Massachusetts is driving demand for corporate aviation,” said Ken Schwartz, a local permitting consultant for the developers, who hope to break ground in 2025.

Referring to the new hangars, he added: “The project will be designed and constructed as an innovative example of sustainable development, with clean and efficient energy at its core.”

State officials acknowledged there are “legitimate questions” about the project and said the environmental review process would “get the facts.”

“We will continue to engage with local officials and residents and carefully examine the proposed project’s impacts on public health and fossil fuel emissions,” said Rebecca Tepper, secretary of the state’s Executive Office of Energy and Environmental Affairs, in a statement.

Environmental advocates and local residents are highly skeptical of Massport's suggestion that fewer ferry flights would offset the emissions of more jets.

“Expanding highways increases cars; expanding private jet capacity increases private jets,” said Elizabeth Turnbull Henry, president of the Environmental League of Massachusetts, who compared the hangars to “building a climate bomb.”



Christopher Eliot, chair of the Hanscom Field Advisory Commission, walked in an area where the proposed hangars would be built. He opposes the construction. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Christopher Eliot, a Lincoln resident who serves as chair of the Hanscom Field Advisory Commission, said Massport's effort to use projections of reduced ferry flights to justify expanding their hangar space deserves “a Pinocchio award.”

“I don't believe there is any evidence to support this claim,” he said.

He and others noted that private jet flights to and from Hanscom have been rising rapidly.

In 2022, there were nearly 37,000 arrivals and departures of private jets at Hanscom — about 16 percent more than in the year before the pandemic began, according to this year's [State of Hanscom annual report](#). In 1992, there were about 8,100 such flights.

They also noted that the number of private jets based at Hanscom has increased significantly in recent years, and that those numbers are projected to rise further.

Between 2012 and 2017, the number of private jets at the airport increased nearly 18 percent; by 2035, they're expected to increase more than 90 percent above 2012 levels, according to Hanscom's most recent [Environmental Status and Planning Report](#).

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Letters to the Editor

In a climate crisis, public impact of private jets is too great

Updated May 28, 2023, 2:30 a.m.

I applaud the local voices who are resisting the increase of private jet traffic at Hanscom Field ([“At Hanscom, the jet set faces headwinds,”](#) Page A1, May 21). But this is not merely a local issue. The use of private jets is an outrageous abuse of privilege by the wealthiest. As David Abel reports, the carbon emissions per person of these jets are multiples higher than those flying commercial aircraft, and if we're serious about reaching our climate goals, most of us should not even be flying commercial except in real emergencies.

I suspect that those who fly in private jets believe, because they're so very important, that their agendas outweigh any damage they are doing to the planet and thus to those less fortunate. But they are wrong.

Susan Donaldson, Northampton

What if, instead of supporting the wealthy few in their inarguably polluting lifestyle, we simply said no? We need to start drawing the line when it comes to building more fossil fuel-supporting infrastructure.

[The climate law passed last year allows some communities to ban gas hookups](#) in new construction. Similarly, the Massachusetts Port Authority needs to say no to new hangar space for private jets at Hanscom Field.

We are in a climate emergency, and every policy decision has an impact. The proposed Hanscom hangar expansion, like so many others projects with an impact on the environment, should be evaluated strictly through a climate lens.

Debora Hoffman, Belmont

The growth of private jet use, as reported by David Abel, is emblematic of the nation's dysfunctional transportation systems. Without measures to discourage the abuse caused, for example, by callous corporations with no regard for the pollution they create, the situation will only worsen.

We should begin by implementing tighter controls on private jet emissions and mandating the use of low-carbon fuels or electric aviation. Additionally, heavy surcharges should be imposed on short-hop private jet flights with few passengers. Meanwhile, improvements in high-speed rail could promote a much cleaner and quieter mode of transportation.

Expansion of airport infrastructure to support more private jets, as proposed at Hanscom Field, is precisely what we should avoid. Prioritizing the indulgences of corporate executives and the wealthy at the cost of unnecessary increases in pollution is terrible public policy.

Frederick Hewett, Cambridge

Expanding hangar space for private jets at Hanscom Field is right down there with building new gas stations that don't include electric vehicle charging and

advertising new gas vehicles on television. They are all moves in the wrong direction.

Jan Kubiak, Hyannis