Earlier this summer, I wrote about the critical importance of renewed efforts to modernize the Los Angeles International Airport. The recent north airfield runway incursion in which two airliners narrowly missed hitting each other and causing a major loss of human life, underscores just how important it is for the city of Los Angeles to take action soon.

Last week, the Chamber and partnering organizations hosted Federal Aviation Administration Administrator Marion C. Blakey in a luncheon where she spoke about LAX.

Blakey stated unequivocally that we need to fix the north airfield now: "I can’t say it any plainer — airports with closely-spaced runways have a far higher rate of incursions than those with widely-spaced ones. It is not my place to advocate one design option over another. What I can do, and what I will do, is to urge Los Angeles to get going. Fix that north airfield now."

Five separate studies released this year all concluded that the northern runways are too close together and must be moved farther apart. Yet, the L.A. City Council directed that a sixth study be conducted after Councilmember Bill Rosendahl and airport neighbors asserted that all five of the safety studies were biased.

Last week, the Board of Airport Commissioners entered into a $2 million contract for the sixth study with NASA’s Ames Research Center as recommended by a citizen’s advisory committee that was heavily weighted with airport neighbors.

In speaking about the new study, Blakey said: “A fair, balanced study must look at the total airport environment. Safety today, safety improvements for tomorrow, and of course, the efficient operation of the airport. You can’t look at safety and efficiency separately. Period. Full stop.”

“L.A. has struggled for years with what it means to modernize the airport. If there is to be one more study added to this dense literature, then let this be the one that prompts action, not inertia or delay. I’ll put it plainly: However you decide to fix the airfield, get it done.”

Once this new study concludes, it is time for action. We cannot afford to waste time or money on more studies or another new round of lawsuits aimed at stalling efforts to modernize and improve safety at LAX.

Blakey also addressed the economic consequences of inaction: “Not only is safety at stake here, but so is your economic strength…Now I know there are some here who will say that’s fine, we’ve got Ontario. But for international flights, you’ve got San Francisco, Las Vegas, and Phoenix Sky Harbor. If there’s one thing about air commerce that should be eminently clear to all of us, it’s that if you don’t pay attention to your business, to your customers, there’s another airport waiting with open arms to welcome them.”

She concluded her speech with a call to action: “I ask all of you to band together to get the north airfield project done. It’s an issue of safety, efficiency, and economic competitiveness. Ask yourself — if business leaders in other cities can step up, why can’t L.A.?”

Blakey is right. After 23 years, it’s time for business, government and community to step up. Let’s make this the study that leads to action.

And that’s The Business Perspective.

Gary L. Toebben
President & CEO
Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce

The Business Perspective is a weekly opinion piece by Gary Toebben, President & CEO of the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce.