

United States Senate
WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 24, 2023

VIA ELECTRONIC TRANSMISSION

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

As you are well aware, the friendly skies have not been very friendly to Americans recently. Tens of thousands of passengers were stranded in airports around the holidays.¹ This sad spectacle was followed in short order by the meltdown of a critical FAA notification system that led to a pause on all departing flights nationwide for the first time since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.² Despite these migraine-level transportation headaches for the traveling public, reports indicate that you have found the skies to be much friendlier due to your access to private, taxpayer-funded flights.³ These reports require a full accounting so that taxpayers know how their dollars are being spent and whether this apparently extravagant travel was really necessary.

According to flight tracking data obtained by an independent watchdog group, you have traveled at least 18 times using taxpayer-funded private jets since taking office.⁴ These include flights to what some describe as a list of presidential swing states, as well as a flight to New York for a radio interview and two brief meetings, one with the president of the ACLU and another with DOT employees.⁵ It is difficult to see how these trips, and perhaps others, required use of expensive non-commercial travel. For example, many commercial travel options exist between Washington and New York. Moreover, radio interviews presumably can be done by calling in to the program. Brief meetings with people you could have met with in Washington,

¹ Mekialaya White, "'We struggle to recover:' Southwest Airlines apologizes to tens of thousands of stranded passengers, cites 'operational challenges' with winter storm Elliott'" *CBS NEWS*, (December 27, 2022), <https://www.cbsnews.com/colorado/news/southwest-airlines-apologizes-stranded-passengers/>

² Dan Booth, "FAA Blames System Failure on Human Error" *Business Traveler*, (January 14, 2023), <https://businesstravelerusa.com/news/faa-blames-system-failure-on-human-error/>

³ "Americans for Public Trust Reveals Buttigieg Consistently Uses Taxpayer-Funded Private Jet" *Americans for Public Trust*, (December 12, 2022), <https://americansforpublictrust.org/news/americans-for-public-trust-reveals-buttigieg-consistently-uses-taxpayer-funded-private-jet/>

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*; "Buttigieg Flew on Taxpayer-Funded Jet to Meet with ACLU President Only to Fly Back Hours Later" *Americans for Public Trust*, (January 10, 2023), <https://americansforpublictrust.org/news/new-buttigieg-flew-on-taxpayer-funded-jet-to-meet-with-aclu-president-only-to-fly-back-hours-later/>

or picked up a phone to talk to, create questions about whether you really required the use of a private jet, especially as you call on Americans to sacrifice to reduce carbon emissions.⁶

Even if this travel was somehow necessary, federal regulations specify that “[b]ecause the taxpayers should pay no more than necessary for your transportation, generally you may travel on Government aircraft only when a Government aircraft is the most cost-effective mode of travel.”⁷ Travel for official business on private jets in the government’s fleet is only allowed when:

(1) No scheduled commercial airline service is reasonably available (*i.e.*, able to meet your departure and/or arrival requirements within a 24-hour period, unless you demonstrate that extraordinary circumstances require a shorter period) to fulfill your agency's travel requirement; or

(2) The cost of using a Government aircraft is less than the cost of the city-pair fare for scheduled commercial airline service or the cost of the lowest available full coach fare if a city-pair fare is not available to you.⁸

While the Department has defended this travel by pointing out that most of your travel has been on commercial airlines, we must ensure that *all* trips are taken with the taxpayer in mind.⁹ The Washington Post, when covering the previous Secretary of Transportation’s use of seven flights on the FAA’s fleet, reported that the FAA at that time charged \$5,644 per hour for operation of its Gulfstream aircraft and \$4,922 an hour for use of its Cessna aircrafts when loaned out to other government agencies.¹⁰ This total took into account costs for pilots, maintenance, fuel, and leasing.¹¹ It appears that at least some of your non-commercial flights, and perhaps all, used the FAA’s fleet.¹² Presumably, these costs have only increased like everything else since then and demands an explanation.

⁶ Veronica Stracqualursi, “Buttigieg says climate summit an opportunity for US to regain moral leadership on crisis” CNN, (April 22, 2021), <https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/22/politics/pete-buttigieg-us-climate-change-cnntv/index.html>

⁷ 41 C.F.R. § 301-10.260 (2022).

⁸ 41 C.F.R. § 301-10.261 (a)(1)-(2) (2022).

⁹ Thomas Catenacci, “Pete Buttigieg often flies on taxpayer-funded private jets, flight data show” *Fox News*, (December 12, 2022), <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/pete-buttigieg-flies-taxpayer-funded-private-jets-flight-data-show>

¹⁰ Drew Harwell & Michael Laris, “Chao used government planes seven times when cheaper flights would not work” *The Washington Post*, (October 5, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/chao-used-government-plane-seven-times-when-cheaper-flights-would-not-work/2017/10/05/c2eeec7c-a7a9-11e7-b3aa-c0e2e1d41e38_story.html

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² Tom Howell Jr. “Sec. Buttigieg insists use of private planes more efficient, saves money, for some DOT travel” *The Washington Times*, (December 12, 2022), <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2022/dec/12/pete-buttigieg-used-private-faa-fleet-over-dozen-t/>

To maintain the trust of the American people, it is critical to be transparent when there exists even an appearance of potential impropriety. Americans must be able to trust that their tax money will not be wasted on unnecessary trips or extravagant modes of travel by government officials. Accordingly, in order for Congress to perform an independent and objective review with respect to whether these flights were appropriate and followed all applicable laws and regulations, please answer the following and provide the requested information no later than February 7, 2023:

1. Please provide a complete and itemized list of all non-commercial flights you have taken at taxpayer expense since taking office, including for each trip the dates, times, departure and destination airports; type of aircraft used; the agency, department, organization, or individual providing the aircraft; a complete passenger list, and your detailed itinerary, including any official or personal reasons for the travel.
2. Please provide a full and itemized accounting of all expenses incurred by the Department of Transportation or any other department or agency for these flights, including costs related to pilots, crew, maintenance, fuel, and leasing.
3. For each flight, please provide all records and communications referencing these flights, including records related to the approval of non-commercial travel, available commercial alternatives for the travel, and any communications raising concerns about your use of non-commercial flights.
4. For each trip, please provide a description of why you believe the choice of a non-commercial flight was warranted, as well as a copy of all policies and directives within the Department regarding the selection of non-commercial travel and how these flights met those standards.

Sincerely,



Charles E. Grassley
Ranking Member
Committee on the Judiciary

cc: The Honorable Eric J. Soskin
Inspector General
U.S. Department of Transportation