



Hey, feds! Park a few billion on this.

By Steve Townes
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I came across an interesting headline one morning not long ago while racing through the news. Seems like virtually all agencies in charge of domestic programs were told to plan on spending cuts for 2006—including Homeland Security. Funding for that particular line item could drop by \$1 billion.

My initial reaction was “Hmm, we’ll have to make do with less.” Then I remembered that for a lot of people on the front lines there never was anything to begin with. All that new funding for emergency response that we heard about, back in those glorious bipartisan days of solidarity and cooperation following Sep 11? Turns out the money never made it to the “high-threat, high-density” areas that need it the most. Key appropriations were diverted so every lawmaker could face the voters and tell ‘em they’d brought home the bacon.

So do we resign ourselves to the dysfunctional ways of the federal government? No. Up here on my soapbox, I can only see the rotorcraft segment of the aerospace industry. But that’s okay—I have a suggestion for my fellow rotorcraft CEOs. Let’s link arms with HAI, AHS and our other associations, and show the rest of the industry some real, action-oriented leadership. This isn’t just our revenue stream—it’s our responsibility to the guys who fly. Who knows? Maybe we can even convince the feds that there’s more to our business than production delays and cost overruns.

Whether the company you run builds, works on, makes components for or flies helicopters, you understand the unique and essential role they play in emergency response. Since shaping public policy isn’t a spectator sport, let’s suit up and get in the game. You know better than any government official what pilots and EMS crews will face the next time terrorists attack. You know they’d probably appreciate being properly equipped.

FLIR might come in handy, in case an attack comes after dark. Multiband digital radio and downlink video feeds would be good, in case command and control on the ground wants a better idea of what’s going on. Likewise hoists, rescue cages, 30-million-candlepower spotlights. We’re not talking about gold plating estimates—we’re talking about what these guys need for observation, interception or real-time, proactive aerial support for the boots on the ground.

According to the Sep 11 Commission’s recent staff statement, the NYPD had helicopters in the air after the planes hit the World Trade Center towers. Unfortunately, there was no video feed to the overall command post. The Office of Emergency Management HQ had evacuated, so there was no radio link either.

In other words, those NYPD birds could watch but they couldn’t help—as much as we know they wanted to. In fact, they tried to radio when part of the South Tower looked like it was about to fall. The FDNY could have used the heads-up from the NYPD, but without the proper communications equipment it couldn’t happen. Are we better off now than we were then? Is the money trickling down to where your pilots can actually see it?

You’re somewhere near a regional office of the Airborne Law Enforcement Association. Talk to their officers. We were woefully unprepared for what happened almost 3 years ago. Ask them if they know any flight departments that are more ready today due to substantial increase in federal funding.

As it happens, my colleagues at Keystone Helicopter talk to state and local police all the time. Not surprisingly, nobody wanted to go on the record, but they’ll talk on background.

We’re better prepared at the local level, due to hard work and sacrifice by the good people at that level, but not because of a new flood of federal capital. Pick a region. Pick a sector, public or private. We aren’t as prepared as we could be, because we don’t have enough pilots, EMS crews, helicopters, equipment or training. None of that gets off the ground without funding.

Don’t just jot a note to your senator and forget about it—actively “work” your local and state governments to raise rotorcraft consciousness, including the value of these pilots and their machines’ mission.

Use local and regional public relations to help educate your community on the merits of a more robust helicopter role in the Homeland Security mission. Make it personal—good things happen when CEOs themselves throw a shoulder into it.

These ideas are just for starters. Like I said, the main thing is to do something. If you’re concerned about the federal government’s funding priorities, then you need to help change them. Get out that personalized letterhead and write to your congressman—today, please! The pilots who use our products deserve nothing less. ✈



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