

AIR TRAFFIC: A LESSON ON PANDEMIC ECONOMICS FROM THE AIRLINES

As yesterday's presser and tweets make clear, Donald Trump is jonesing to reopen the economy in the United States. He's doing that even as the airline industry is weighing whether to voluntarily shut down.

Thus far, according to NBC, Trump has opposed such a shutdown because he fears how the optics will affect his own political fortunes.

One point of tension as Trump tries to balance public and economic health has been air travel. He has repeatedly raised concerns in meetings about the optics of grounded planes and empty airports, according to two people familiar with the meetings. He's argued that those images would look bad for him and could further drag down the economy, they said, while others have made the case for sharply curtailing air travel.

But according to the WSJ, airlines are considering shutting down voluntarily anyway. There are several reasons the airlines want to shut down (and would prefer to be ordered to do so).

The first and most obvious is that what flights are flying now are so empty they're losing revenue.

On Monday, thousands of flights were canceled, in some cases because planes weren't full enough to justify the trip, with passengers numbering in the single digits. Some planes that did take off have been emptier than ever before. For example, a flight between New York's

LaGuardia Airport and Washington DC had just three passengers. American Airlines Group Inc. and United Airlines Holdings Inc. canceled over 40% of scheduled flights Monday, according to Flightaware.com, a flight tracking site. Some airline officials expect planes to be even emptier as the week goes on.

[snip]

But in the past few days, according to some of these officials, the prospect of an eventual halt has increased for various reasons, including mounting red ink from flying nearly empty planes.

There's a bit in the story about concerns on the part of flight crews and onerous efforts to adjust schedules to minimize the possibility that crews can infect each other.

But by far, the biggest reason the nation's airlines may shut down, voluntarily or not, is that infections at a number of air-traffic control facilities have shut down "nearly a dozen" facilities, including towers at Chicago's Midway and Las Vegas' McCarran Airports.

Airlines are preparing for the possibility that contagion-driven staffing emergencies at air-traffic control facilities could force the issue, making it impossible to continue operating in parts of the country.

Airport towers at Chicago's Midway International Airport and McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas remain closed after nearly a week of cleaning.

[snip]

A separate important factor is that Federal Aviation Administration officials fear that additional positive tests for Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, among agency

controllers and technicians who maintain their equipment could unravel the nation's air-traffic control system. Nearly a dozen traffic-control facilities from New York to Chicago to Las Vegas have been temporarily closed to disinfect and clean them, with many more employees at home on self-quarantine while others are being investigated for potential contacts with infected workers.

So far, longstanding FAA contingency plans have managed to deal with the closures by imposing temporary flight restrictions, rerouting planes and shifting responsibilities among backup facilities and employees. Inside the agency, though, concern is growing that new employee infections, especially at key locations, could upend existing contingency options. In some cases, replacing controllers removed from their radar screens would be extremely difficult because it typically takes months of training to get them up to speed to do specific jobs.

Three days ago, traffic for the entire NYC area shut down briefly after a trainee who had been working at a Long Island air traffic control facility tested positive.

Flights into major New York City-area airports were briefly halted on Saturday, as the coronavirus continues to cause staffing issues at air-traffic control facilities around the country, the Federal Aviation Administration said.

An air traffic controller-trainee based at a control center on Long Island tested positive for the virus, COVID-19, the FAA said. The trainee hadn't been in the facility since March 17 but the agency is working with local health

authorities to sanitize and clean affected areas. The center is operational, it said.

The FAA map of disruptions show the NYC area remains a problem.

This seems to offer an illustration that advisors can use to explain to Trump and his Fox News enablers why he *may not* be able to reopen the economy next week, and he seems headed to do. Aside from the fact that states and (unless Trump actually does use the Defense Production Act, which FEMA will only start using today) corporations can simply ignore him, there are critical functions of our economy that are proving unmanageable given the way infections can shut down key cogs of national and global systems. Until there's testing and disinfecting regime that can ensure a single sick person doesn't bring that network down, it's not clear Trump has the ability to reopen the economy.

We would be better off, in my opinion, if Trump's advisors had given him a list of things that had to happen – testing, medical equipment, and a screening regime like the ones used in Asia – before he could reopen the economy. Thus far, Trump's efforts to meet those needs have been inadequate.

For now, however, he might look to the airlines' inability to manage a relatively small number of infections among air traffic controllers, even during a time of sharply curtailed flights, to understand why it's not as simple as saying we'll just have to tolerate some illnesses.