ALERT BULLETIN

TO: FAA (AJT-1, AOV-1)

INFO: FAA (AVP-1, AVP-200, AFS-260, AFS-200, Director of Air Traffic Operations - WSA, CSA, ESA (North and South)), ATSAP, A4A, ASAP, ALPA, AOPA, APA, ATSG, CAPA, IATA, ICASS, IFALPA, IPA, NBAA, NTSB, RAA

FROM: Becky L. Hooey, Director
NASA Aviation Safety Reporting System

SUBJ: FAA Contract Tower Issues

We recently received ASRS reports describing a safety concern that may involve your area of operational responsibility. We do not have sufficient details to assess either the factual accuracy or possible gravity of the report. It is our policy to relay the reported information to the appropriate authority for evaluation and any necessary follow-up. We feel you should be aware of the following:

ASRS received a report from an Air Traffic Controller assigned to a Federal Contract Tower (FCT) facility describing multiple equipment issues affecting the efficiency and safety of tower. Reporter suggested more attention should be given to the FCT program as a whole.

Reporter stated they have experienced failures affecting their communications and their recording capabilities.

Reporter also expressed concern about the quality and reliability of the maintenance work done at the facility.

ASRS previously alerted on contract tower issues. Alert Message 2024-73/6-3 is also enclosed.

ACN 2304651

DATE / TIME

Date of Occurrence	202511
Local Time Of Day	1801 to 2400

PLACE

Locale	ZZZ.Airport
State	US
Altitude - AGL	0

ENVIRONMENT

Flight Conditions	VMC

AIRCRAFT / EQUIPMENT X

Make Model Name	No Aircraft

PERSON 1

Function - Air Traffic Control	Flight Data / Clearance Delivery
Function - Air Traffic Control	Ground
Function - Air Traffic Control	Local
Function - Air Traffic Control	Supervisor / CIC
ASRS Report Number	2304651

EVENTS

Anomaly	Ground Event / Encounter - Ground Equipment Issue
Anomaly	No Specific Anomaly Occurred - Unwanted Situation
Detector - Person	Air Traffic Control

NARRATIVE 1

The control tower lost commercial power. Generator Power Status indicator showed generator on and running. However, the HVAC systems in the tower cab [and] equipment radio room were all down and not running.

I heard the battery backup component in alarm, with a low battery or battery failure notification. A short while later, all tower cab equipment shut off completely. The generator remained running the entire time. Eventually it indicated a Low Fuel alarm. I do not believe the fuel tanks were ever full or topped off. Commercial Power eventually was restored shortly, however, the ETVS/TEDs (electronic voice switches, total of 3 in the control cab) remained in the boot status and did not automatically start the software in order to be useable and resume normal ATC services.

I am submitting this report in an effort to outline a bigger picture issue of the FAA Contract Tower (FCT) program that I have witnessed over the past years at this Control Tower, in addition to my short years as a certified controller in other ATC Towers. It is very concerning to me that a basic structure of Quality Control (QC) or some inspection of the CFRs for ATC facilities is not conducted more routinely. It seems to be that everything here at this county managed Control Tower, is handled by reactionary recourse.

I would ask the question, where is the FAA QC department who inspects these FCT towers who do not have a weekly or monthly FAA check or even basic preventive maintenance done to ANY of the equipment? Every

computer and piece of hardware is covered in layers of dust, and will eventually lead to the PC fans overheating and shutting down. I have already witnessed 2 of the Enhanced Terminal Voice Switch (ETVS)/Terminal Equipment Display (TED) console equipment shut down and be completely replaced. At the same time that was done a few years ago, the entire communications recording hardware also failed. This facility controlled for a long time without any recorded evidence. That is a major liability concern not only as a controller, should any major event be reviewed later and no evidence is able to be found for that time, but it puts the entire FAA at risk because the real problem is that frequent inspections are not being done, at least not in person, on sight.

This Control Tower is in close proximity of ZZZ1, ZZZ2. Even while operating ATC service, the airspace is congested, challenging and has "close calls" with the complexity combined with ZZZ Approach and operations that can get out of hand quickly, combined with airline services and a high volume of general aviation all in close proximity between the two airports.

It is very appalling how this kind of failure on equipment happens and is not discovered sooner. In the years I have successfully performed my duties here, I have only seen a contracted ATC equipment company come by maybe once or twice a year. Any other tech operations response has been initially assessed and done by county personnel dispatching their own operations personnel who perform airport patrols and runway checks. It has been said many times by the airport authority that they try to get their operations personnel to problem solve some things. Therein would be an area I would want to look at.

To the company or those that have come by, it is unknown if they are completely "up to speed" or totally knowledgeable of equipment capabilities as we have tried to prepare a short list of equipment anomalies or issues we struggled with in having to compensate for while performing ATC services (typically volume adjustments of the ETVS/TEDs systems that have no equalization among the different lines coming to them for communications, example phone line being too low when talking to ZZZ Center and the shout line to ZZZ Approach being extremely loud).

This all may very well paint a larger picture problem of the entire FCT program that relies on county management of airports to be involved in ATC repair or operational issues that they have no real experience in, because there is no assigned FAA tech operations to the FCT program with the exception of a technician coming from a nearby FAA non-FCT facility, to simply inspect and handle 1 piece of equipment, such as the Flight Data Input/Output (FDIO) NAS system, that prints off automation of flight plans.

I would like to end by a few simple points to focus on out of all of my statements:

Where is the FAA QC/safety side in verifying a power failure with a working generator, doesn't happen again? This goes for everything pertaining to equipment preventative maintenance like computers being dusted and cleaned so they don't fail. The county management tends to send its "groundskeepers" or "mowing operators" to try to do basic building engineer repairs but they are not specialized in the type of hardware we use, hence why no one caught the failing Uninterruptible Power Supply (UPS) batteries or the generator failing to send power to the building itself.

The funds at ZZZ are currently being used to pay for a private cell phone in the event of communications failures. This emergency cell phone is a piece of operational equipment that SHOULD BE provided by the county but there has been a back-and-forth headache of the county understanding the logic here and issuing a furnished device. Because of the delay and lack of agreement, the ATC controllers at ZZZ took it upon themselves and their union benefit funds to provide a phone for emergencies and we HAVE continued ATC services using this cell phone in issuing and relaying clearance and control instructions with ZZZ Approach and ZZZ Center. Every other FAA facility and many FCT facilities are issued a backup cell phone provided by the government. This should be no exception for this county. In the event of a loss of life or major mishap in aviation involving ZZZ Tower, controllers have refrained and will not use their OWN personnel cellphones, as they are prohibited across the FAA federal rules in operation rooms/cabs. The ATC employer company has provided their own questionable SOP policy to allow controllers to retrieve their personal cell phones to continue providing ATC service. This should not be allowed. For over 5 years here, this issue has been brought up and a clear answer on legal outcomes, should someone die in an aviation crash during an ATC Zero or Alert event, would the controllers' cell phone be confiscated as evidence? ZZZ Approach has their own recording capability, but what if their system fails? How foolish and irresponsible will this look in explaining to a loss of life outcome, that evidence cannot be acquired or if evidence is acquired, controllers trying to do their jobs will have the primary and necessary communication device that manages their personal lives, be taken in as evidence. We will not even entertain such a thing, nor put ourselves in that position.

I apologize for the long narrative but I am trying to connect some clear understanding here, as it seems to not be fully understood by the powers that be, and to all these reports go to. Many of my concerns have numerous reports already made through the reporting program, there is a valid paper trail.

Again, this report is being done to get a more serious look or attention on the FCT program as a whole and how the maintenance of ATC needed equipment is possibly being neglected and not verified to be fully operational. There is more going on here and items that are failing that have not been mentioned.

I want to help solve these issues and I believe it is a problem that has not yet cost a loss of life but it concerns me that it very well may and it could have been prevented. I do not want to be in that position if or when it does.

SYNOPSIS

Contracted Air Traffic Controller reported concerns with inadequate maintenance of the standard and back-up equipment and suggested more attention should be given to the FAA Contract Tower program as a whole, including verifying ATC equipment is fully operational.

Previous Alert

We recently received ASRS reports describing a safety concern that may involve your area of operational responsibility. We do not have sufficient details to assess either the factual accuracy or possible gravity of the report. It is our policy to relay the reported information to the appropriate authority for evaluation and any necessary follow-up. We feel you should be aware of the enclosed deidentified report.

To properly assess the usefulness of our alert message service, we would appreciate it if you would take the time to give us your feedback on the value of the information that we have provided. Please contact Dr. Becky Hooey at (408) 541-2854 or email at becky.l.hooey@nasa.gov.

DATE / TIME

Date of Occurrence	202312
Local Time Of Day	1201 to 1800

PLACE

Locale	EDC.Airport
State	TX

ENVIRONMENT

Flight Conditions	VMC

AIRCRAFT / EQUIPMENT X

ATC / Advisory - Tower	EDC
Make Model Name	Small Aircraft, High Wing, 1 Eng, Fixed Gear
Operating Under FAR Part	91

PERSON 1

Function - Air Traffic Control	Ground
Function - Air Traffic Control	Local
ASRS Report Number	2089492

EVENTS

Anomaly	ATC Issue - All Types
Anomaly	Deviation - Track / Heading - All Types
Anomaly	Deviation / Discrepancy - Procedural - Published Material / Policy
Detector - Person	Air Traffic Control
Result - Flight Crew	Requested ATC Assistance / Clarification
Result - Air Traffic Control	Provided Assistance

NARRATIVE 1

Pilot was flying VFR, checked on frequency to the east of the airport. I gave him instructions to enter a left downwind at midfield for Runway 13 and advised he was not in sight. He read back the instructions. He later keys up and asks if he's supposed to make a right turn to enter the left downwind. I told him if he was coming from the east at midfield like instructed, he was in fact supposed to make a right turn to enter the left downwind.

I then noticed an aircraft flying over the departure end of my runway from south to north and verified with the pilot if that was him. He confirmed and said he no longer wanted to land and wanted to go on course to his destination. This whole ordeal was very unsafe and if I had traffic he would have been a very serious problem. If we had a radar display at this facility this whole situation could have been avoided without any sort of incident or confusion. We cannot see 90% of aircraft until they're about 1 – 2 miles away.

This is unacceptable on the pilot's part as well as he should report the correct direction he is coming from. Please do something about this before something seriously bad happens. Get us a radar display, take some pilot certifications, and update our Management when actions are taken so we know something is being done. We do not have access to Cedar here as we are a new contract Tower. We don't have access to the FAA network to properly put in deviations. This is the 3rd report I have made in the last few months or so.

SYNOPSIS

EDC Tower Controller reported an arriving aircraft made an incorrect position report and flew across the departure end of the active runway without notifying ATC. The reporter stated there is no radar display at the facility and Controllers cannot see most of the aircraft until they are within close proximity.