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Avoid another midair scare

FAA should require new alert system in cockpits to help pilots avoid disaster

A near-collision between three planes in the dark sky off New York City last year offers a dramatic illustration of how urgently the NextGen air-traffic control system is needed.

A collision avoidance system currently in use saved the day for the planes' crews and passengers aboard American Airlines Flight 951 as it left Kennedy Airport en route to São Paulo, Brazil. But the new NextGen technology should make flying safer by alerting pilots more quickly when they are headed for what could be a midair crash.

The Federal Aviation Administration should hold firm on, if not accelerate, its Jan. 1, 2020, deadline for every airplane flying in controlled airspace to be equipped with the new technology to beam its position to controllers. But the FAA should go further by mandating the use of associated equipment that would enable pilots to receive real-time information on the location, speed and course of planes flying nearby. There should be incentives for airlines to add all the gear sooner rather than later.

Flight 951 was 88 nautical miles east of New York City Jan. 20, 2011, when it just missed colliding with two Air Force cargo planes headed to Wrightstown, N.J. Flight 951, headed southeast and climbing, and the cargo planes, headed northwest and descending in formation, were being guided by two different air-traffic controllers, according to a recent report by the National Transportation Safety Board.



FILE PHOTO BY CRAIG RUTTLE

A controller on duty in the tower at Kennedy Airport

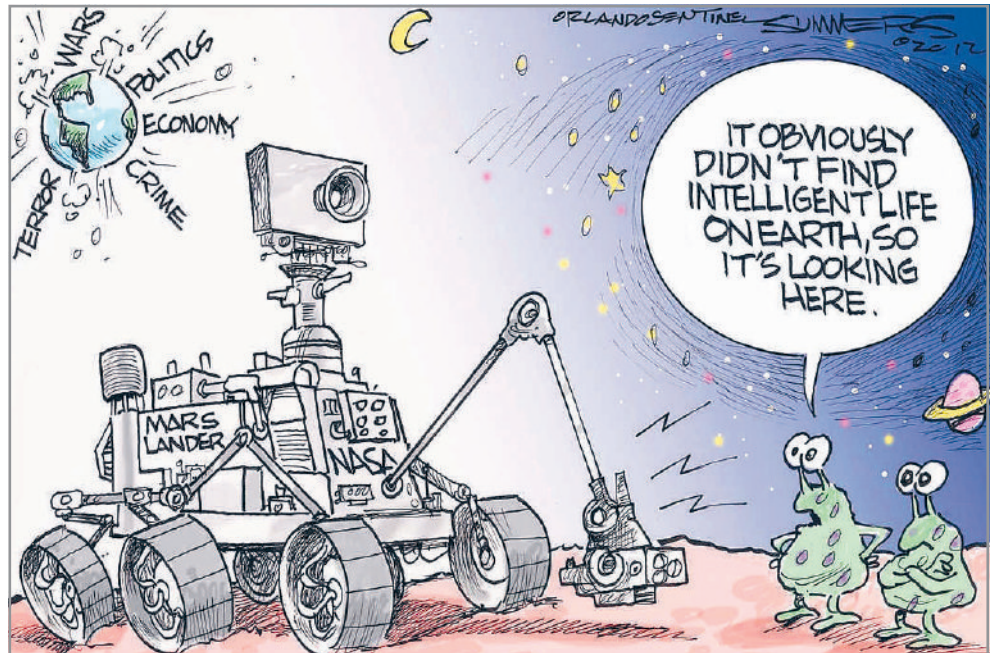
Due to a misunderstanding between the two controllers, the planes were all at 22,000 feet and hurtling toward one another. And the controller handling Flight 951 lost track of the plane for a key 57 seconds while confirming flight-plan instructions for the pilot of another plane.

Calamity was averted when a traffic collision avoidance system that relies on a transponder signal from plane to plane sounded an alarm in the cockpit of Flight 951, when it was just seven miles from the cargo planes. After split-second evasive maneuvers, the planes passed a nerve-rattling 2,000 feet apart. In a similar situation, the new NextGen satellite-based Automatic Dependent Surveillance Broadcast system (ADS-B) would allow pilots to avoid much of the heart-pounding drama.

The mandated portion of the ADS-B system will pinpoint the position of aircraft for controllers. It's an improvement over the current radar-based system in which signals can decay over distance and need to be refreshed every few seconds. The ground infrastructure for the ADS-B system is in place along the East Coast and is already in limited use. The ground component is scheduled to be complete nationwide by 2014.

That infrastructure will also serve the unmandated portion of the ADS-B system designed to allow pilots to receive information to dramatically improve their ability to avoid midair collisions. It would enable them to track all ADS-B-equipped planes in the air within a 15-mile radius, continuously and in real time on a cockpit screen. Even if a controller is distracted or makes a mistake, pilots would know key moments sooner when they're headed for trouble.

Quickly outfitting all planes to take advantage of every facet of the system will make the skies safer for all. **N**



Walt Handelsman is off. See more editorial cartoons at newsday.com/opinion

Give the gift of reading

If you can read this, consider yourself lucky. A surprising number of adults can't, and that condition colors practically every aspect of their lives.

The most recent numbers, compiled in 2003 by the U.S. Department of Education, showed 160,000 Suffolk County adults (14 percent) and 105,000 Nassau adults (10 percent) lacked basic literacy, meaning they read below a sixth-grade level.

Statewide, the number was 3.3 million, or 22 percent of adults. Those results showed adult illiteracy up from a 1992 study. Literacy organizations say the increased need they're seeing now indicates the statistics will be even worse when a new study is released this fall.

A bad economy acts as a triple whammy on groups such as Literacy Nassau and Literacy Suffolk that teach adults to read. More people want to improve their skills, to raise their chances of finding work in a tough market.

Some volunteers no longer have time to help those who need it, as tutors are forced to re-enter the labor market or work more hours to make ends meet. And contributions dry up.

Suffolk Literacy has a wait-



PHOTO BY LINDA ROSIER

Willie Nunn, 61, of Roosevelt, took part in literacy tutoring two years ago. He reads with his granddaughter, Zyaire.

ing list of 500 people for free tutoring. Nassau Literacy's list holds 125. Those in need include immigrants learning English as a second language, and born-and-bred Americans who never got their reading on track.

Adult illiteracy is a shame anywhere, but on Long Island — where the first impressions are of prosperity and high education, and where our school districts are a point of pride — it's a travesty.

We have a lot of retirees here, and plenty of others with free time. We have col-

lege students who could get a jump-start on teaching careers and colleges that might find partnering with adult literacy groups would reward their students in a variety of ways. The teaching mostly takes place in libraries, and space shortages have become an issue of late. That's a need that schools, colleges and other organizations could help resolve.

Literacy is a tremendous gift, one that most of us take for granted. We need to band together and give this gift to all who seek it. **N**