

Statement by the Port of Seattle in Response to Trump Administration Immigration Ban

01/31/2017

President Trump's decision to ban immigrants from seven countries immediately impacted Seattle-Tacoma International Airport and the community that it serves. As the Port of Seattle Commission firmly expressed on Saturday, January 28, this executive order runs counter to our values.

Federal officials first briefed our aviation leadership on the federal government's plans to implement the executive order around midnight on Friday, January 27, long after affected travelers had already begun their flights, and just hours before the first affected travelers arrived at the airport.

We respect the exercise of free speech as long as the airport can continue routine operations in a safe manner. The implementation of this order created severe operational challenges for our airport.

Over the following 36 hours, the Port of Seattle took a number of steps to serve travelers, accommodate protests and maintain a secure airport.

Traveler and Community Service

Early on Saturday morning, Port Commissioners and community advocates began assembling resources to assist affected travelers and their families.

The Port of Seattle coordinated with two local nonprofits, the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project and the American Civil Liberties Union, as well as other governmental partners and social justice advocates to ensure that passengers and their families would have access to legal representation.

Commissioner Courtney Gregoire, working at the gate of a departing airline, facilitated crucial conversations between legal representatives, federal agencies and U.S. District Court Judge Thomas S. Zilly. This swiftly formed partnership ultimately secured the release of two passengers who would have been sent back to their destination.

The Port of Seattle Commission also invited other elected leaders to come to the airport to express concern with the impact of this executive order on our region. Following a press conference, Port Commissioners enabled lawmakers to connect with federal agencies to express their concerns and request status updates.

In addition to providing space for legal representatives to work, airport staff set aside an airport conference room, with food and beverages, to provide comfort and privacy to additional waiting families.

On Sunday morning, Department of Homeland Security notified the Port of Seattle that no individuals were being detained at Sea-Tac and that the remaining travelers were released to continue their travels in the United States.

Public Safety at Sea-Tac Airport

As our Saturday afternoon press conference ended, immigrant rights supporters began arriving at Sea-Tac Airport.

The protest began at 3 p.m. with a peaceful demonstration. By 6:30 p.m. our public safety officers estimated the crowd size at 1,000 to 1,500. By 8:30 p.m. we estimated the crowd size at 3,000. For most of Saturday's protest we were able to safely accommodate both passengers and protesters. The majority of the protesters left by 9 p.m.

After 9 p.m., a cascading series of events threatened the airport's security and safety of passengers and employees. The situation turned from a peaceful protest to a coordinated attempt to disrupt airport operations. Protesters began marching through the airport and dividing into groups. Leaders used a megaphone to chant: "If they can't get out, you can't get in. Shut it down!"

Protesters stationed themselves to block entrances to checkpoints and airline ticketing, impeding passenger and crew travel to and from airlines. Protesters blocked the entry and exit from elevators and escalators, creating a severe safety hazard, and then shut down the escalators using the emergency stop. Protesters linked arms and blocked exit routes for arriving passengers, chanting: "This exit is blocked." Because exits were blocked by protesters, the airport began transporting some arriving passengers via lengthy bus rides.

Passengers began using emergency exits between the secure and non-secure sides of the airport, triggering breach alarms and raising the real possibility that the Port would have to evacuate the entire airport.

Over the next several hours, officers witnessed or heard over the police radio, reports of the following incidents:

- Physical altercations in progress
- Passengers and employees who were physically blocked in by protesters and unable to leave the facility
- Ticketed airline passengers who were physically blocked from access to the security checkpoints

- Passengers who had to physically force their way through, and were pushed and shoved by the protesters in order to get to the security checkpoint
- Passengers who were separated from members of their families and separated from personal possessions

Law Enforcement Response

Throughout the evening, airport officials and police spoke to protesters and their leadership, in an attempt to move the protest to the south end of the terminal where they would not impede airport operations. Protesters did not move and continued to express their intention to shut the airport down.

By 10:30 p.m., the escalating number of attempts to close security checkpoints, attempts to enter secure zones, and refusal by protesters to move away from critical airport operations led the Port of Seattle police to determine it was time to disperse the crowd. At this point, officers estimate that between 600 and 1,000 protesters remained at the airport.

Officers issued multiple warnings urging protesters to disperse or face arrest. Many of these strategies worked. Protesters began going home and the crowd gradually became smaller. However, it became clear that some protesters would refuse to move despite threats of arrest. Officers warned protesters that they would use pepper spray if they did not disperse. As a last resort, at about 11:30 p.m. officers deployed pepper spray at the B Concourse exit area and again at 1:51 a.m. near the center of the ticketing area.

Our reports currently show that pepper spray was only deployed in two locations; however, we are still assembling detailed reports from all law enforcement agencies. We believe protesters expected pepper spray would be used as many were carrying commonly known remedies such as cartons of milk and milk of magnesia.

The protest finally ended at approximately 2 a.m., more than eleven hours after it began, and just before a large crowd of passengers began arriving for 5:30 a.m. and 6 a.m. flights.

As of January 30, 32 people were cited and released on misdemeanor disorderly conduct charges. One person was charged with misdemeanor assault.

As the protest grew, the Port of Seattle asked local law enforcement agencies for assistance with crowd management. Officers from Auburn, Bellevue, Federal Way, Kent, Normandy Park, Renton, Seattle and Tukwila police departments; King County Sheriff's Office; and King County Metro and Washington State Patrol responded to this request over the course of Saturday afternoon and Sunday morning. We are deeply grateful for their cooperation and assistance.

As the operators of Sea-Tac, the Port of Seattle Police Department was the lead law enforcement agency. The lead agency is responsible for directing tactics, procedures and protocol. Our law enforcement leadership is asking the agencies that worked at the airport on

January 28 and 29 to provide their deployment reports by Friday, February 3. We will review their reports to determine if changes to our public safety planning and response protocols are needed and issue our report to the public.

We will review any complaints regarding treatment by Port of Seattle police and facilitate complaints to other jurisdictions.

Sound Transit Request

Our airport was staffed with the public safety personnel appropriate for a routine Saturday afternoon and evening, not for a large public protest.

As we began receiving reports of very large crowds heading towards Sea-Tac, Port police asked Sound Transit to slow arrivals for less than 30 minutes so we could learn more about the anticipated crowd size and make public safety plans. While we did not take this action lightly, we should have done a better job communicating and coordinating with the leadership at Sound Transit. In the future, this decision making will be done differently.

We are already in discussions with Sound Transit on better protocols for the future.

First Amendment Activities

The Port of Seattle has a process and procedures for First Amendment activities. We respect the exercise of free speech as long as the airport can continue routine operations in a safe manner.

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