By Carolyn Lee
The Imperial Republican

The Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association (AOPA) is lobbying against a plan by the Obama administration to change the funding of the nation's aviation system.

The AOPA issued a statement this week saying, "This week's budget documents expose the administration's desire to shift to a user fee-funded system. Equally alarming for pilots is language laying the groundwork for debate over whether general aviation (GA) should pay a much larger share of the FAA's budget."

The GA includes all flying except the scheduled airlines and the military.

Part of GA is the Angel Flight Central. This organization, composed of volunteer pilots, fly patients needing specialized medical care, including chemotherapy and dialysis, to hospitals throughout Nebraska.

"Many of these patients are from rural areas and would otherwise be hard-pressed to receive the care they need," according to JoAnn Guear of General Aviation Serves America.

Starting in 2011, the administration proposal envisions $9.6 billion coming from user fees, up more than $2 billion from the initial proposal just two months ago. That figure rises to $11 billion by 2014.

Currently fuel and ticket taxes along with support from the general taxpayer monies fund the FAA. The Obama proposal would shift that support to user fees. User fees would impose charges on GA planes each time they use FAA services, such as weather briefings and navigational aids.

Guear said Angel Flight is imperiled by the proposal because pilots use their own planes and fuel and absorb other costs as volunteers for the service.

Richard Stull of McCook has been a pilot for Angel Flight for about three years. The number of flights he makes in his Piper Cherokee Six varies each year, but on an average he flies four to six patients per year.

Stull, a franchise owner of McDonalds in McCook, flies from McCook to Omaha, from Broken Bow and Grand Island to Denver, and has made trips to the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota.

He became involved because of his work with the Ronald McDonald Houses at medical centers, which house the families of long-term patients.

"I want to give something back. I'm very fortunate and am blessed. I had an affiliation through my business with those in need," he explained of his involvement.

He's particularly been involved with young cancer patients, but wants to help all cancer patients.

Stull said he's probably the pilot furthest west in Nebraska, so doesn't get as much air time as other volunteers. But, he covers a large area.

He said airspace is like a highway. If the government imposed a fee on traveling by car, he asked, how many people would voluntarily travel out of town?

Stull said the user fee proposal would hurt not only his flying, but "General aviation pilots would be negatively impacted by that. We do the Angel Flight by what we want to give back. There's no remuneration for anyone. We absorb all the costs."

Although he said he didn't know what the fees would be, Stull said "It jeopardizes anyone's ability to provide services."

The AOPA has launched General Aviation Serves America to educate policymakers, opinion

leaders and the public about the vital role GA plays in local communities. Actors Harrison Ford and Morgan Freeman, both avid pilots, are volunteering their services in support of the campaign.

For more information, visit www.gaservesamerica.com.