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MINNESOTA AIR GUARD MUSEUM & A-12 "BLACKBIRD" SPY PLANE

Rep. Betty McCollum: [Who do you think gets interested when headlines warn the CIA is "hijacking" a spy plane from a group of veterans in Minnesota? Spy buffs, of course, who decry the federal government's controversial decision to dis-assemble a rare A-12 "Blackbird" spy plane at the Minnesota Air Guard Museum and move it to the CIA headquarters in Virginia. For several weeks, Minnesota's congressional delegation has been trying to come to the rescue of the low-budget museum, and now they have a new cadre of allies. Among them is John Lear. His qualifications include accomplished pilot on 17 years of CIA missions, passionate lover of the Cold War-era A-12 and SR-71 spy planes, and son of Learjet founder Bill Lear. He's a sort of nexus for an eclectic network of pilots, aviation historians, former CIA operatives and folks whose Google alerts include phrases like "Area 51" and "Operation Oxcart." He has no ties to Minnesota, but he said Thursday he's taking up the fight. "This is a royal rip-off," he said in a phone interview from his home in Las Vegas. "I'm going to pull every string I can." One such string is his late father's longtime support of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada. "I know he's busy, but my father was always his largest contributor, and I've never asked him for much." Officials with Reid couldn't be reached for comment Thursday. A measure introduced last month by Minnesota Senators Norm Coleman and Amy Klobuchar would order the Air Force to return the plane to the local museum, which is near Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, and put it back together. It also would make the museum's foundation the plane's owner, replacing its current status as a loaner from the Air Force. The bill's future remains unclear. It's currently awaiting action in the Armed Services Committee. . . . U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum has written two letters to Air Force Secretary Michael Wynne asking about the cost of the move and has had no response, her office said Thursday.]—*February 23, 2007; Saint Paul Pioneer Press (Saint Paul, MN)*