

Reynolds reverses air travel practice

State tapped COVID funds for new plane

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Gov. Kim Reynolds has been traveling to events on an Iowa State Patrol airplane over the past year – a reversal from the practice of her predecessor, Gov. Terry Branstad.

Branstad, who appointed Reynolds as lieutenant governor before she ascended to the state's top position, previously told the Des Moines Register that maintaining airplanes for executive travel was a poor use of public funds.

Heather Nahas, a spokesperson for Reynolds, confirmed to the Register that the governor has been using a state-owned plane. The Iowa Department of Public Safety purchased the Cessna 208B Grand Caravan in December 2024 with COVID-19 relief funds, state records show.

According to the plane's flight records, pilots flew the Grand Caravan to Sioux City and Waterloo before the governor appeared at events in those communities this year.

Nahas did not respond to several emailed questions about the plane, including how much the state spent to buy it.

"Gov. Reynolds travels the state extensively for official business, sometimes by air in an Iowa State Patrol plane," Nahas said in an email. "It is only used by the governor for official purposes."

State tapped COVID-19 relief funds for new plane

Nahas did not answer a question about which of the State Patrol's six planes the governor uses. But flight records show that pilots flew the state's Cessna 208B Grand Caravan to cities in Iowa the same day that Reynolds appeared at events in those towns.

The State Patrol added the Grand Caravan, which can seat 14 passengers, to its fleet just over a year ago.

According to the plane's title records, State Patrol Capt. Michael Kober signed a



Gov. Kim Reynolds smiles during former Gov. Terry Branstad's Iowa Award ceremony at the Iowa State Capitol on Thursday, Dec. 11, 2025, in Des Moines. LILY SMITH/THE REGISTER

bill of sale for the plane in December 2024. The agency bought the aircraft from Oregon-based Integrated Surveillance and Defense.

The Iowa Department of Public Safety paid the company \$2.3 million that same month, according to state records. The agency also paid the company \$2.3 million in September 2024. The records reviewed by the Register do not state whether DPS paid the company for two planes or just the Grand Caravan.

The state purchased the Grand Caravan with COVID-19 relief funds that Congress allocated to states and local governments to respond to the health, safety and economic challenges of the pandemic.

According to a state report about Iowa's use of relief funds, state officials bought the plane to meet "the demands of conducting aerial searches for missing persons, locating fugitives, providing surveillance during criminal investigations, and documenting crime scenes."

The report added that the plane would help the State Patrol spot drivers exceeding speed limits.

"The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an increase in speed citations over 100 mph and pursuits, highlighting the need for enhanced capabilities to address these challenges," the report said.

The report does not mention that the State Patrol would transport the governor to events in the plane. But following the

purchase, Department of Public Safety officials added a new item to their list of duties for the agency's Air Wing division: "Executive transport."

That duty appeared in the agency's 2025 annual report; department officials did not mention executive travel in any annual report during the previous 18 years.

According to Aviacost, a platform that tracks the expense of operating various planes, flying a Grand Caravan costs about \$830 an hour.

In a 2016 interview, Branstad told the Register he did not support owning a state plane to transport public officials, and that the state's planes had been sold off in the 1980s, during which he was governor for most of the decade. He said employing pilots and mechanics to take care of planes was too expensive, adding that officials could charter planes when they needed them.

"We drive a lot more than we fly these days," said Branstad, who Reynolds succeeded as governor in 2017 when he resigned to become ambassador to China. "That takes more time, but I think it is saving the taxpayers money, and I have always been very careful and very frugal."

During his first stint as governor, Branstad frequently traveled by plane. In 1983 alone, according to Register archives, he used an Iowa Department of Transportation plane 100 times.

About a quarter of those trips were for Republican Party political functions. Branstad also brought his wife and children on the plane for trips. An Iowa law requires public officials to only use state airplanes for official state business.

Branstad defended his use of planes at the time and said his campaign committee paid for flights to political events.

"The job is a political job," he said at the time, "and you can't separate it totally."

Flight tracking data aligns with some of Gov. Kim Reynolds' trips

According to data from Flightradar24, a flight tracking service, pilots flew the Grand Caravan on 137 flights from Feb. 26, 2025, to Feb. 19 of this year. The data counts round trip journeys as two flights.

At least some of those trips align with Reynolds' public appearances.

On Sept. 25, for example, the Grand Caravan departed Ankeny at 9:20 a.m. and landed in Waterloo about 30 minutes later. Reynolds attended a ribbon-cutting ceremony in town that was scheduled to start at 10 a.m.

The plane left Waterloo at 12:45 p.m. and landed in Davenport about 45 minutes later. Reynolds attended a ribbon cutting in Bettendorf, about 4 miles east of Davenport, at 3:45 p.m. The plane departed Davenport for Ankeny an hour after that.

On Jan. 29, Reynolds visited Sioux City. Local radio station KWIT reported ahead of the trip that Reynolds planned to stop by homes that local career academy students built; she then endorsed U.S. Rep. Ashley Hinson in her race for U.S. senator at a 5:30 p.m. event at the Orpheum Theatre.

A pilot flew the plane from Ankeny to Sioux City at 12:20 p.m. that day and returned at 9 p.m.

On Feb. 15, Reynolds visited the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls to tour campus and attend a 2 p.m. men's basketball game against Drake University.

The Grand Caravan took off from Ankeny at 10 a.m. that day for a 31-minute flight to Waterloo, the city next to Cedar Falls, which does not have its own airport. Just before 4:30 p.m., the plane departed Waterloo and returned to Ankeny.

The point is
not saying
everything,
but everything
that matters.



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