To the Judges:

Executives at the most profitable airline in the U.S. never would have publicly acknowledged the company’s high mechanical failure rate were it not for the work of the Tampa Bay Times.

Throughout 2015 -- a year that would see Allegiant Air planes break down at least 77 times in mid-flight -- the company’s leaders were adamant that nothing was amiss. They accused reporters of being on a witch hunt or of acting as agents of a pilot union in the midst of a tense labor dispute.

It soon became clear that, to get past the blanket denials, the Times would have to learn once and for all whether Allegiant was an outlier. There was just one problem. Nobody, not even the FAA, had ever before done the kind of analysis needed to show that. Conventional wisdom held that it was impossible. The Times’ reporters went to work.

They used the Freedom of Information Act to gather thousands of pages of reports of airline mechanical failures. Then they compared those with records of emergency landings kept by the private flight data collection company FlightAware.

The process took months, but when it was finished, the reporters had their answer. Allegiant’s breakdown record was far and away worse than any other major U.S. carrier. Nearly half of its 86 planes failed at least once in midair in 2015. Faced with these facts, Allegiant’s leaders abruptly reversed course. On the eve of publication, they asked for a meeting with reporters at the airline’s Las Vegas headquarters, where they made a series of striking statements.

Allegiant CEO Maurice Gallagher Jr., who often attacked the Times coverage in 2015, acknowledged the company had too many mechanical problems. Other executives said a company push for too-fast growth was to blame.

"I can look at what we did, and it wasn't acceptable," Gallagher told the reporters. "I don't disagree with the thrust of your numbers. ... We want to be well-known as being reliable and on time, and obviously safe, and that's an important part of our brand. And we're going to make sure we do those things. But if you stub your toe, step up and own it and move on."

As a result of the Times’ persistence, the flying public now has more information when making decisions about buying a plane ticket -- information that neither Allegiant nor the FAA was willing to give them before the reporters started digging.

Also in the wake of the Times’ coverage, Allegiant Air has announced plans to retire its aging MD-80 series jets, which were the planes most prone to mid-flight breakdowns. It has pledged to slow its marathon growth. And it has put systems in place that it says will dramatically increase mechanical reliability.

Because they were relentless in the face of adversity and persevered until they could tell this important story, I am proud to nominate the Tampa Bay Times reporting team for a Gerald Loeb Award.
Allegiant Air
Investigative

William R. Levesque, Nathaniel Lash and Anthony Cormier

BREAKDOWN AT 30,000 FEET

Allegiant Air changes course after Times investigation, admits too many planes failed

BREAKDOWN OF OVERSIGHT

At Allegiant, a board and business model with roots in ValuJet

One Allegiant Air plane had four emergency landings within six weeks
I-4 runs through hopes for president

The 132-mile road from Tampa Bay to the Atlantic is a diverse must-win swath in a must-win state.

BY ADAM C. SMITH

FLORIDA'S BEST NEWSPAPER

Hopes for I-4 runs west Florida; Democrats clean winning statewide races has once Florida's "golden girdle" — decides Sunshine State elections. The explanation is an overlooked trend along the now-132.3-mile swath. The vast majority of unexpected landings at Allegiant happen on this model jet. See ALLEGIAN T, 11A

Tampa Bay Times

Published November 6, 2016
Lisa Cozzolino started to panic as Allegiant Air Flight 844 circled over Pinellas County, burning off fuel for an emergency landing. “All the bad things I’ve done in my life,” she said to her sister, “and now I’m going to die.”

Matt Jones fumbled with his cellphone, trying to call his wife to say goodbye, as crew members on Allegiant Flight 822 ordered him to tuck into crash position over Baltimore. “I said to myself, ‘I’m never going to see my wife or my kids or my grandkids again,’” he recalled.

Jessica Stoffel was so afraid on Allegiant Flight 175 over Mesa, Ariz., that she grabbed the stranger next to her and squeezed his hand. “I was terrified and honestly did not think we were going to make it,” she said.

All major airlines break down once in awhile. But none of them break down in midair more often than Allegiant.

A Tampa Bay Times investigation — which included a first-of-its kind analysis of federal aviation records — has found that the budget carrier’s planes are four times as likely to fail during flight as those operated by other major U.S. airlines.

In 2015, Allegiant jets were forced to make unexpected landings at least 77 times for serious mechanical failures.

Cozzolino’s flight was interrupted by a leaky hydraulic system. Jones was on a plane with failing brakes. The engine on Stoffel’s plane caught fire during an aborted landing, and the jet dipped suddenly to one side. Its wing nearly touched the ground.

None of the 77 incidents prompted enforcement action from the Federal Aviation Administration, which doesn’t compare airline breakdown records to look for warning signs.

To create such a comparison, Times
Breakdown of Oversight

Drew Wilson

What failed in flight
These parts and systems have forced Allegiant’s planes to land unexpectedly the most between January 2015 and September 2016.

 Cockpit instruments 6 times
 Cabin pressure 9 times
 Engines 39 times
 Nose landing gear 7 times
 Tail compartment 26 times

Sources: Times analysis of records from the FAA and FlightAware

reporters built a database of more than 65,000 records from the FAA.

Working through the data, they connected a year’s worth of flight records with documents showing mechanical problems at the 11 largest domestic carriers in the United States, including Allegiant. They interviewed 20 aviation experts, including former federal safety inspectors, aircraft engineers and mechanics.

Then they traveled to Las Vegas and met with Allegiant executives for a series of interviews. The airline did not dispute the newspaper’s findings, which included:

• Forty-two of Allegiant’s 86 planes broke down in mid-flight at least once in 2015. Among them were 15 forced to land by failing engines, nine by overheating tail compartments and six by smoke or the smell of something burning.

• After certain systems on Allegiant planes fail, the company repairs them and puts the planes back in service, only to see the same systems fail again. Eighteen times last year, key parts such as engines, sensors and electronics failed once in flight, got checked out, and then failed again, causing another unexpected landing.

• Allegiant’s jets are, on average, 22 years old. The average age of planes flown by other carriers is 12. Experts say planes as old as Allegiant’s require the most rigorous maintenance in the industry. But Allegiant doesn’t staff its own mechanics at 107 of the 118 airports it flies to.

• Allegiant relies most heavily on McDonnell Douglas MD-80s, an aging model retired by all but two other major U.S. carriers. The company’s MD-80s fail twice as often as those operated by American Airlines and three times as often as those flown by Delta.

Allegiant’s troubles have not gone unnoticed. A string of emergency landings in recent years prompted websites, TV stations and newspapers, including the Times, to ask questions about the company’s safety record. Time and again, top executives downplayed concerns and said the airline was no different than others.

Amid the increased scrutiny, the FAA in April launched a three-month review of Allegiant’s maintenance, training and operations programs. The agency found problems with Allegiant’s maintenance paperwork, including a failure to report a mid-flight engine shutdown within a required time frame. But the FAA said nothing it discovered was severe enough to require a fine or other serious enforcement action.

Instead, the agency required Allegiant to file a plan for addressing the FAA’s findings. The airline submitted it in September, and the FAA accepted it — essentially giving Allegiant a clean bill of health. “We were always a safe airline,” Allegiant’s chief operating officer Jude Bricker told the Associated Press on Sept. 30. “This gives credence to our claim.”

Plenty of people are rooting for Allegiant, including travelers who chafe at paying high airfares and officials in the out-of-the-way towns and smaller airports that Allegiant serves. Among
Allegiant executives said the created. A team of journalists used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain records.

To compare the 11 major U.S. passenger airlines, the

Passengers wait on the tarmac at St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport to board a flight to Lexington, Ky.

fuzzy feeling for this airline or for

ment at issue is very old (and

immediate engine removal," said

C o n t i n u e d  f r o m  1 1 A

the chief operating officer. "We’re then we can get reliability where

them is St. Pete-Clearwater Interna-

tional Airport, where the airline ac-

counts for about 95 percent of annual passenger traffic.

But industry observers say there’s a reason most air travel is so expensive. It’s difficult both to offer great deals and spend the money needed for a reliable fleet.

When the Times first reached out to Allegiant officials for this story, they declined to speak with reporters. Then, after the newspaper presented them with its findings, they asked for a meeting. During five hours of interviews at the company’s Las Vegas headquarters and training center, they acknowledged their planes break down too often and said the airline is changing the way it operates.

“I can’t sit here and say that you’re wrong,” Allegiant CEO Maurice Gallagher Jr. said. “We’re very much focused on running a better operation.”

Experts who reviewed Allegiant mechanical records at the Times’ request said improvements are needed. They said the records show Allegiant missed routine inspections. They said they found documentation that engines were fixed and then broke down again weeks later. They said the company appeared to allow minor problems to linger until they became major malfunctions.

“Allegiant is probably going to have an accident,” said former FAA inspector Richard Wyerowski, who became a whistleblower in 2002. “That airline should basically be grounded and re-evaluated for their certificate.”

No tracking

The FAA requires airlines to fill out forms called service difficulty reports when planes have serious breakdowns.

Carriers also have to file monthly “mechanical interruption summary reports”— logs of failures that cause delays, diversions or cancellations.

But the federal government doesn’t regularly check these documents for

Emergency vehicles wait next to the runway at St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport in June after an Allegiant jet landed because of problems with its hydraulic system. The next day, after repairs, the same plane made another unscheduled landing, with Lisa Cozzolino on board.
accuracy or completion, and it leaves it up to airlines to store them. As a matter of policy, the FAA also doesn’t compare airlines’ records to search for warning signs. Agency officials said one airline is so different from the next, in the types of planes it flies and the way it flies them, that such a comparison wouldn’t be useful.

Instead, FAA inspectors examine each airline independent of the others. It’s a policy that has continued even though a majority of the FAA’s own inspectors say it should be changed. According to a 2013 report, three in four inspectors surveyed by the U.S. Department of Transportation said comparing airlines would make air travel safer.

Former FAA inspector Edward Jeszka said it wasn’t unusual for inspectors to get together unofficially and swap information about airlines, “to see if there were any outliers.” But this was always done on the inspectors’ own time, said Jeszka, a whistleblower who said he was retaliated against after he reported mishandled money at the FAA.

For this story, the Times used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain mechanical interruption summary reports for the 11 largest airlines in the United States. Then reporters connected the reports with records of unexpected landings from the U.S. Department of Transportation and FlightAware, a company that collects aviation data.

The result is the best available picture of how often mechanical problems cause midair emergencies at major airlines.

**Signs of trouble**

The average U.S. airline has about three unexpected landings caused by mechanical problems for every 10,000 times it flies, the Times found. Southwest had the lowest rate of problems last year. It had about one in 10,000 flights end in an unexpected landing. JetBlue was in the middle of the pack. It had about three flights end in unexpected landings.

American Airlines had one of the highest rates. It had five. Allegiant had 12.

One of them was Flight 864, which was on its way to Hagerstown, Md., from St. Petersburg in June 2015 when the smell of smoke filled the cabin. The pilot circled back and 141 passengers scrambled down emergency slides onto the tarmac.

“Pandemonium broke out,” said passenger Bryan Dougherty. Nobody
was hurt.

Another was Flight 458, which was going to Indianapolis from Las Vegas when flames started shooting out of its left engine, rocking the passengers with explosions.

“Four bangs when you are in the air isn’t something you want to hear,” passenger Sheila Casey wrote on Facebook. The plane landed back in Las Vegas. Nobody was hurt.

Another was Flight 848, which was headed to Richmond, Va., from St. Petersburg but diverted to Greensboro, N.C., in August 2015. The plane was cruising at 33,000 feet when passengers heard a loud bang and then a grinding noise coming from the engine.

Then the cabin started vibrating. "It's like if you were sitting on a washing machine during the spin cycle," passenger Grace Morse-McNelis said. "I was just quietly praying. I have four kids." Nobody was hurt. Mechanics later discovered a problem with the plane's throttle and removed an engine, records show.

More than 15 experts who reviewed Allegiant records gathered by the Times pointed out a litany of problems.

Seven of them said FAA documents suggest a scattershot approach to maintenance. They said Allegiant too often missed deadlines or allowed planes to fly knowing parts were broken — something the FAA actually allows all airlines to do.

Seven experts said Allegiant's engines were overheating too often. An engine getting too hot is a sign that critical parts are deteriorating and should be replaced or repaired, they said. In 2015, engines overheated at least 32 times.

An overheating engine "is not trivial and can be cause for immediate engine removal," said Steven Kushnick, a former engineer who worked on jet engines for Pratt & Whitney. He added that high operating temperatures can be a sign that engines are near the point of failing.

Five experts said repeated instances of smoke filling cabins and cockpits was a sign of problems in the air and engine systems that are not being repaired.

Marcus Giordano, a former mechanic and maintenance supervisor with 30 years of experience working on jets, said smoke is often caused by worn seals in the engine that need to be replaced. “As a maintenance supervisor, I'd be like, ‘You need to look at the seals,’” he said.

Based on his review of Allegiant mechanical records, Kushnick wrote: “Either the equipment at issue is very old (and tired, and due for failures), and/or the maintenance is superficial or performed inexpertly.

“Either way, I have no warm fuzzy feeling for this airline or for their technicians.”

In interviews with the Times, Allegiant executives said the company's operations were “stressed” as the airline rapidly expanded in recent years. They said they now plan to update their fleet and concentrate their oldest planes in places where the company has the largest crews of mechanics.

“Now we've gotten to a point where, hey, we need to take a step back, slow down growth, let's standardize the fleet, and then we can get reliability where we want it to be,” said Brickler, the chief operating officer. “We're moving really as rapidly as we can.”

‘We're dead’

Nick Janovsky didn’t have to be a veteran mechanic to spot the signs of wear when he climbed aboard Allegiant Flight 872.

A former flight attendant, Janovsky immediately noticed grime on the outside of the plane, as if it hadn't been washed. The carpet was scuffed and dirty, and the seats were torn.

It occurred to him that if Allegiant wasn't on top of the little things, he had to wonder about the big things. His plane pushed back from the gate at St. Pete-Clearwater International, bound for Omaha, Neb., on Feb. 12.

They were barely out of Florida before a strong electrical smell, like a burning hair dryer, spread through the rear of the cabin. Janovsky saw flight attendants rush past with looks of panic on their faces. Nobody knew what was going on.

Then Janovsky and the other passengers were pitched forward in their seats. They were descending faster than any plane he had ever been on.

Janovsky got a feeling in his stomach like he was on a roller coaster. Somewhere in the cabin, a woman was screaming. Children started to cry.
Janovsky looked out the window. 
“I saw clouds, and we were crashing through them,” he said. And then he thought to himself: “We’re going to slam into the rock. We’re dead.”

The lighted signs in the cabin flickered out. The air conditioner jets stopped blowing.

At last, a flight attendant got out a megaphone — the plane’s PA system had no power — and told the 153 passengers they were making an emergency landing.

Janovsky pulled his seat belt as tight as he could. Around him, the other passengers dug their fingers into the armrests. “Everyone braced for the absolute worst,” Janovsky said.

They made it down safely, landing at an airport in Birmingham, Ala. It felt like forever before they were allowed off the plane, Janovsky said.

Federal records show that Janovsky’s plane had been forced to land due to a faulty air circulation fan, a key part of a system that keeps the cabin pressurized, among other things. It was one of at least four serious mechanical failures involving that jet in the past 15 months.

Janovsky didn’t begin to relax until he was in the airport bar.

Later, as he waited in Birmingham for a replacement plane, he heard that Allegiant had offered him and the other passengers $100 vouchers for future travel.

No thanks, he thought.

He hasn’t flown Allegiant since.

**An aging fleet**

Flights like Janovsky’s happened at least 77 times last year.

Nearly all of them had one thing in common.

They were McDonnell Douglas MD-80s, a gas-guzzling jet that had its heyday in the late 1980s and 90s.

More than half of Allegiant’s fleet are the MD-80 series, bought second-hand from foreign airlines in the past 10 years. Their average age is 27 years old.

There’s nothing wrong with operating a fleet that relies on old planes, experts say — as long as the planes are meticulously maintained.

“The MD-80 is a beautiful aircraft,” said Giordano, one of the longtime jet mechanics interviewed by the Times. “But let’s face it, parts that have not caused any problems for years and years may now be getting to the point where they start to fail. It’s hard to keep up with an aging fleet.”

Allegiant says its maintenance program is adequate.

“From our perspective, we’re doing everything we know to do,” Brickner said, “to increase the reliability of these aircraft.”

But Allegiant’s MD-80s break down far more often than the aging planes of the same model operated by the other carriers.

One 27-year-old MD-88 operated by Allegiant filled with smoke or the smell of burning wires seven times from October 2015 to March 2016.

Another plane, a 21-year-old MD-83, had its landing gear malfunction three times in the same week in August 2015. Before that, its tail compartment overheated three times in two weeks.

Yet another plane, a 31-year-old MD-81, had its fuel tank circuitry fail twice in 10 days, its right engine overheat three times in four weeks and its landing gear malfunction three times in just over a month. All of the breakdowns took place in the four months from June to September 2015.

Despite 21 incidents in 10 months, the FAA took no enforcement action.

In July, Allegiant leaders announced plans to buy new planes — Airbuses — for the first time in the company’s history. They also said they would phase out the MD-80s altogether.

That won’t happen until the end of 2019, they said.

“In retrospect, I wish we started the program earlier to replace the fleet,”
Bricker, the chief operating officer, told the *Times*. "If we could go back in time, we would have gone a lot heavier into the (Airbuses) earlier."

**Problems persist**

In interviews with the *Times*, Allegiant executives said they are investing $1 billion in the airline's fleet and slowing a push for growth.

“We’ve taken steps to improve ourselves, and I think some of the numbers are showing it this year,” said Gallagher, the CEO.

In the first half of this year, Allegiant did post a sharp decrease in breakdowns compared to the same period last year.

From January to June 2015, they had 58 mechanical failures, records show. From January to June of this year, a period that overlaps with the FAA’s review of Allegiant, they had 33.

But the same records show breakdowns continue. This July alone, Allegiant had nine unexpected landings caused by mechanical failures, compared to 12 last July.

One of them was Flight 749, which took off from South Bend, Ind., for Orlando on July 7.

More than halfway through the trip, an odor like “burning popcorn” permeated the cabin of the 21-year-old MD-83. Then the plane began to vibrate, terrifying the 166 passengers on board.

The plane made an emergency landing in Jacksonville.

Mechanics eventually discovered that a cabin light fixture was loose, causing electrical wires to spark.

It was the plane’s fourth emergency landing in 15 months.
I-4 runs through hopes for president

The 132-mile road from Tampa Bay to the Atlantic is a diverse must-win swath in a must-win state.

The obsession continues as another neck-and-neck presidential race rolls to a close Tuesday, and the vagaries of swing voters in America’s most fought-over state — Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Daytona Beach, weighing the ever-changing impulses and influences of Florida between St. Petersburg and Dayton
LAS VEGAS — Allegiant Air leaders who once battled any suggestion the carrier’s rate of emergency landings and other aircraft mishaps were unusually high are now taking a sharply different tack. They’re offering something of a mea culpa.

The airline offered no pushback late last month when presented with a Tampa Bay Times’ analysis showing the carrier, in 2015, was four times as likely to suffer unscheduled landings due to mechanical problems as other major U.S. carriers.

“I can look at what we did (in 2015) and it wasn’t acceptable,” Allegiant CEO Maurice Gallagher Jr. said in an Oct. 26 interview at the company’s Las Vegas headquarters. “I don’t disagree with the thrust of your numbers. … We want to be well-known as being reliable and on time, and obviously safe, and that’s an important part of our brand. And we’re going to make sure we do those things. But if you stub your toe, step up and own it and move on.”

More openness by Allegiant may be particularly striking given the industry’s general abhorrence to discuss maintenance practices and emergencies.

“Well, you have to appreciate, you’re breaking pretty new ground here with this stuff,” Gallagher told the Times. “This industry historically has not talked about safety. There’s no upside to going out and talking about it.”

Throughout 2015, Allegiant was quick to blame its pilots union and the media for overhyping its rate of emergency landings, arguing that Allegiant had been unfairly scrutinized for routine events.

Gallagher, for example, told the Times in January that its stories about the budget airline were filled with “baseless assumptions and accusations.” One story, he said, “repeats the faulty premise that something is wrong with Allegiant. Let me be clear: There is not.”

But in interviews with the Times last month, Gallagher and other Allegiant leaders went further than ever in acknowledging the airline’s planes have suffered too many in-flight breakdowns.

That shift in tone includes Gallagher’s acknowledgment that one of the fastest-growing airlines in the nation will be slowing some of its expansion. “We just need to be more conservative,” Gallagher said.

In recent months, Allegiant has noted it needs to replace its fleet of aging MD-80 aircraft, which it said has proven far less reliable than it anticipated. To that end, the carrier is buying 12 new Airbus aircraft in the next two years, a departure from Allegiant’s business model of buying used aircraft at bargain prices.

Allegiant’s stance in June and July 2015, when a series of emergency landings at St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport first attracted notice, was that nothing was amiss at the airline.

“Neither ourselves nor the FAA have found any trends that show us there is any cause for concern,” Allegiant spokeswoman Jessica Wheeler told the Times in June 2015.

At the time, Allegiant officials even indicated the age of its MD-80 aircraft was a red herring for anyone trying to link the planes to emergency landings.

“Maintenance events are not tied to any specific location or to the age of an aircraft,” the airline said in a written statement to the Times. “Most maintenance events are related not
to the age of the aircraft, but rather to the number of takeoffs and landings (cycles) performed by an individual plane.”

Today, Gallagher said Allegiant has made important strides in improving its performance. But Allegiant is careful not to equate a lack of reliability with its aircraft to a lack of safety.

Allegiant began discussing its operational problems more openly earlier this year. In April, Gallagher addressed a room full of state and local government officials at the St. Petersburg Marriott Clearwater hotel and acknowledged the airline had experienced a “bad summer” in 2015.

“When you put people and machines together, there are going to be problems,” Gallagher said at the time. “The issues you’ve read about in the paper are directly related to our own growth. We’ve since changed our management here (in Pinellas County). You won’t see that experience again.”

At about the same time, Allegiant chief operating officer Jude Bricker told Bloomberg News that the airline’s efforts to improve aircraft reliability have led to a lower rate of service interruptions such as aborted takeoffs and emergency landings, from 2.81 per 1,000 flights in April 2015 to 1.37 in March.

“We’re investing in everything we know to invest in,” Bricker said. “Most of the indicators we watch are positive. Everything is moving in the right direction.”

Certainly one lingering problem for Allegiant was fixed this summer when the airline’s pilots union, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, agreed to a work contract. Allegiant had bluntly accused the union throughout 2015 and early 2016 of feeding media hype about aircraft maintenance problems.

“The Teamsters are trying everything they can do to make us look bad,” Allegiant’s then-COO Steve Harfst told the Times in September 2015.

But Gallagher’s latest comments indicate the carrier recognizes it bears some of the responsibility for that bruising publicity itself.
STATE SNIFTS OUT FALSE FOOD CLAIMS

Fresh from Florida? Wild-caught fish? Investigators are looking for falsehoods.

BY LAURA RILEY | Tampa Tribune

The investigations started sweeping up to play and June.

The Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Affairs is looking for false claims about fish that are caught in Florida. It’s part of an ongoing investigation into false food claims.

The state’s attorney general, Pam Bondi, said the investigation is ongoing.

“It’s not a big issue,” she said.

The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is also investigating the claims.

The investigations come as part of a national trend of false food claims.

In Florida, the state attorney general said the investigation is ongoing.

“Florida is not the only state to investigate false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.

The investigation is ongoing, she said.

“I don’t know if we’re going to be able to find any false food claims,” she said.
Allegiant troubles and FAA inaction

When Allegiant Air’s planes started failing more and more, the FAA could have cracked down. It didn’t.

By Nathaniel Lash and Michael LaForgia
Times Staff Writers

On Allegiant Air’s worst night last year, mechanical breakdowns forced the airline’s planes to make one unexpected landing after another.

One flight had to land in Mesa, Ariz., after the captain’s instrument panel started smoking.

Another returned to Las Vegas when the tail compartment over-heated. Another circled back to Mesa because one of its power generators started failing. Another diverted to Idaho Falls when a fuel pump malfunctioned.

Before the night was finished on June 25, 2015, five Allegiant flights had been interrupted in four hours, all because different planes had failed in midair.

The Federal Aviation Administration collected records on all of the incidents.

But it didn’t order a single corrective action.

In 1996, ValuJet 592 took off from Miami, caught fire and crashed into the Everglades, killing all 110 people on board.

After the crash, some federal officials branded the FAA with a harsh nickname.

They called it the “tombstone agency” and decried it as an unwieldy bureaucracy that was slow to crack down unless spurred by disaster.

Today, little has changed.

Again and again in the past 20 years, auditors for the U.S. Department of Transportation have chronicled the FAA’s struggles to police the...
airline industry, pointing to staffing problems and a failure to analyze key data.

The FAA’s dealings with Allegiant Air — a low-cost carrier run by a founder of ValuJet — are a case study in those struggles.

A Tampa Bay Times review of hundreds of pages of federal records shows that the FAA levied no fines and took no other enforcement action against Allegiant despite dozens of mid-air breakdowns in 2015.

The FAA has broad powers to ensure airlines are operating safely, including the ability to issue fines, ground air carriers and launch sweeping investigations.

But the agency took none of those actions in response to Allegiant’s mechanical problems last year, even as the airline’s planes were breaking down at the highest rate of any major U.S. carrier.

It didn’t fine Allegiant or subject the airline to stepped-up monitoring after preventable maintenance errors by Allegiant contractors nearly led to a serious accident in Las Vegas in August 2015.

And FAA inspectors didn’t even interview a pilot who was fired for ordering the evacuation of a plane in St. Petersburg in June 2015, even though such firings can be a signal of a corporate culture in need of scrutiny.

Responding to the Times’ findings, the FAA declined to address any incident specifically.

Instead, an FAA spokeswoman emailed a statement to reporters saying the agency works hard to ensure air travel is safe.

“U.S. airlines have safely transported more than five billion passengers, two thirds of the world’s population, over the past eight years without a life lost, and that is no coincidence,” the statement said. “It is as a result of an unprecedented collaboration between industry, labor and the FAA to share critical safety data.”

Allegiant officials declined to comment for this story. Late Friday, a lobbyist for Allegiant emailed Pinellas County leaders a letter from Allegiant CEO Maurice Gallagher Jr. that called the story an “unsubstantiated attack.”

“The FAA — acknowledged worldwide as the gold standard of aviation safety regulators — is obligated to ensure airlines within the United States are operating at the highest levels of safety,” Gallagher wrote. “To that end, the FAA has subjected Allegiant to the extensive oversight it exercises over all U.S. airlines. Thanks in large part to the efforts of the experts at the FAA, air travel, including on Allegiant, is by far the safest mode of transportation. Any insinuations that the FAA has been negligent in its oversight of Allegiant are patently false.”

But a review of more than 5,000 pages of audit reports by the federal transportation department’s inspector general showed breakdowns in the FAA’s monitoring of airlines.

One lesson the FAA drew from the ValuJet crash was that inspectors...
needed a better way of keeping tabs on how airlines operate. The agency pledged to use data to focus attention where it was needed most: on trends within airlines that hinted at possible future safety problems.

The FAA poured more than 15 years and tens of millions of dollars into building such a data system but never got it to work properly. The agency replaced it two years ago.

Now the agency uses an approach that, according to eight former FAA employees interviewed for this story, amounts to allowing the airlines to police themselves.

The U.S. airline industry is widely seen as operating one of the safest systems of air travel in the world. There have been no fatal crashes of U.S. passenger jets since 2009.

But former federal officials interviewed by the Times said the system is pressing its luck by essentially allowing airlines to self-regulate.

They added that monitoring the politically powerful airline industry is often a frustrating job.

They said it’s fraught with the dangers of angering company executives, who complain to members of Congress, who complain to FAA administrators, who discourage or even punish diligent regulators.

“Probably one of the best things going right now is we haven’t had any accidents. And that’s great for the flying public, but it’s not through anything the FAA has done,” said Edward Jeszka, a whistle-blower who spent 12 years as an FAA inspector.

“That’s just the luck of the draw. Because there have been so many near misses, close calls, engine failures.”

**Lax response**

The FAA’s passive approach was on display during a chain of events involving Allegiant in the past three years.

In September 2013, FAA inspectors found Allegiant’s maintenance programs were deficient, among other things.

Records obtained by the Times show the FAA said it would bar Allegiant from adding routes, buying new planes or growing in other ways until the company corrected the problems. Allegiant agreed. The FAA took no enforcement action.

In December 2013, an Allegiant MD-88 went to Oklahoma City for an overhaul from the airline’s main maintenance contractor. Before it was finished, a worker signed off on an engine inspection without noticing that a key part — a cotter pin — was missing from the fuel delivery system.

A day after the plane went back in service, it took off from Fargo, N.D., loaded with passengers. It was in the air only a few moments before the right engine, flooded with fuel, started revving uncontrollably. The pilot had to shut it down and make an emergency landing back at the airport.

The contractor, AAR Corp., reported the mistake to the FAA. The agency allowed Allegiant and AAR to do their own review of the incident, records show.

Allegiant promised not to let the offending AAR employee sign off on future Allegiant repairs. The FAA was satisfied with the company’s response. It issued no fines and took no other enforcement action against the airline or the contractor.

In May 2015, an Allegiant MD-83 was getting an overhaul by AAR when another worker signed off on a tail repair. He didn’t notice that, once again, a cotter pin was missing from a rod that connects the tail to the pilot’s flight controls.

In the course of the next 261 flights, during which the plane carried tens of thousands of passengers, the tail rod slowly worked its way loose until, on Aug. 17, 2015, it jammed in a steep climb position as the plane was roaring toward take off in Las Vegas. One hundred and sixty-four people were
on board.

Feeling the nose of the jet pressing up hard, unable to force it back down, the pilots slammed on the brakes at more than 100 mph.

Lori Miller remembers the panic in the cabin as she and the other passengers were pitched forward in their seats. “People were screaming,” Miller said. “And you could smell something hot in the cabin. I was thinking, ‘This plane is going to catch on fire, the way it smelled.’”

Nobody was hurt. But the captain later reported to a federal aviation safety tracking system that, “had the aircraft become airborne, a serious accident would have resulted.”

That night, federal records show, an Allegiant manager sent a text message to an FAA inspector responsible for overseeing the airline, alerting him to the problem.

The FAA and Allegiant both reviewed the plane’s maintenance records and concluded the contractor was responsible. In response, AAR said it would require an additional inspector to sign off on repairs of critical parts. Satisfied with AAR’s response, the FAA inspector closed out the case.

That was the full extent of the federal investigation. The FAA issued no fines and took no other action.

A spokeswoman for AAR declined to comment for this story. The company is still Allegiant’s main maintenance contractor.

“A million red flags’

Those weren’t the only examples in recent years of the FAA’s lenient approach. The Times identified a handful of other incidents that could have prompted action by the FAA but did not.

At least 12 times in 2015, Allegiant had three or more flights end in mechanical breakdowns in a single week. During a single four-day period

From left, Hank Krakowski, COO of air traffic organization for the Federal Aviation Administration; Nicholas Sabatini, FAA associate administrator for safety; and Calvin Scovel III, U.S. Department of Transportation inspector general, testify in April 2008 during a hearing before a Senate subcommittee on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.
in June, the airline had 10 flights end in unexpected landings caused by mechanical failures.

“That is like a million red flags going up, and nobody doing anything,” said Richard Wyeroski, a former FAA inspector who turned whistle-blower. “The FAA is reactive. They react after the accident. They don't stop it.”

The FAA has struggled with turnover in the office that oversees Allegiant for at least the past three years. But a particular staffing change should have raised a different sort of flag, said Tom Devine, legal director of the Government Accountability Project, a Washington-based whistle-blower advocate group.

In May 2015, John Tutora, who had served as interim inspector in charge of monitoring Allegiant’s maintenance programs, retired from the FAA. Then he immediately went to work for Allegiant as manager of “regulatory compliance.”

Devine said the situation points to a larger problem with the agency.

He said “revolving-door appointments” can lead to inspectors going easy on the companies they police either because they don’t want to anger prospective employers or because former colleagues are intervening with them on the companies’ behalf.

In a phone interview with the Times, Tutora said there was nothing improper about his hiring. He said he only oversaw Allegiant for about nine months, while temporarily filling a vacancy left by an inspector who had retired.

He said that, before retiring, he met with an FAA ethics officer who told him he was free to work for Allegiant so long as he remained behind the scenes and didn’t represent the company in dealings with the FAA.

“And that’s what I did. I worked in the background, I never attended any of the meetings with the FAA, never had an influence or anything like that,” Tutora said. “They didn’t hire me to try to make deals with anybody or do anything disingenuous.”

He said his job consisted of managing how the company’s maintenance side reacted internally to requests and communications from the FAA. He added that Allegiant’s maintenance operations were as sound as any airline’s he had ever come into contact with.

“These guys are passionate in the maintenance and engineering branches about safety, mitigating risk and not doing anything stupid like cutting corners or doing anything that would possibly harm the company, or anybody in it, or outside of it,” said Tutora, who retired from Allegiant in April.

The firing of an Allegiant captain in July 2015 marked another hands-off moment for the FAA.

Six weeks earlier, Jason Kinzer had been piloting a flight from St. Petersburg to Hagerstown, Md., when flight attendants reported smelling smoke in the cabin. He circled back to St. Petersburg and, believing passengers and crew were potentially in danger, ordered them off the plane. Eight people were hurt in the scramble.

Allegiant fired Kinzer for ordering “an evacuation that was entirely unwarranted,” according to a copy of the termination letter obtained by the Times.

“Furthermore, during a review of the event and in subsequent conversations you have repeatedly insisted that you made a good decision to evacuate the aircraft, and, if faced with a similar situation, you would follow the same course of action,” the letter said. “It is for these reasons that your employment with Allegiant is terminated effective immediately.”

That firing should have drawn FAA scrutiny, said Loretta Alkalay, an aviation attorney who spent 30 years as a regional counsel prosecuting enforcement cases for the FAA.

She said thorough federal inspectors would have at a minimum interviewed the pilot and his co-workers.

Kinzer told the Times last month that no one from the FAA has contacted him.

He sued Allegiant over his firing in November 2015. His lawsuit still is pending in Nevada.
Consultant fills void

In April, amid mounting publicity, the FAA began a review of Allegiant’s operations that originally wasn’t scheduled to happen for another two years.

It gave the airline more than a month’s notice. By the time the FAA began the review, Allegiant already had tapped a former top FAA official who could help guide them through the process.

Against a backdrop in which the FAA rarely cracks down, and airlines want to avoid accidents at all costs, consultants like Nick Sabatini play a key role in getting airlines to make their operations safer.

After spending about 18 years as a New York City police officer, Sabatini joined the FAA in 1978. He rose to associate administrator for aviation safety, a top official in charge of regulating airlines. He was still in that position in 2008, when a scandal broke involving Sabatini’s section of the FAA.

A safety inspector monitoring Southwest Airlines discovered the carrier was operating dozens of planes that were overdue for safety inspections, including at least one that had a potentially dangerous crack in its fuselage. But when he reported his findings to his supervisor, the supervisor allowed Southwest to keep the planes flying — even though the problems were uncorrected.

The inspector turned whistle-blower, focusing attention on what he termed Southwest’s widespread non-compliance with federal rules. The allegations prompted outrage and congressional hearings.

At the height of the scandal, Sabatini testified before the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, saying he was “outraged” at what had occurred. He added that the FAA did not require safety inspectors to operate in a way that formed excessively close relationships with airlines.

Three of the committee’s members later alleged that statement was misleading.

He retired less than a year later. But records show he wasn’t out of the aviation business for long.

Sabatini, who didn’t respond to requests for comment, incorporated a consulting firm in 2009 and immediately started working for airlines and other businesses that potentially were in trouble with aviation authorities.

He led a meticulous internal review for Colgan Air after a plane operated by the regional carrier crashed in February 2009 near Buffalo, N.Y., killing all 49 aboard.

He was called in after an Air France flight crashed into the Atlantic Ocean off the coast of Brazil, killing 228.

The Reno Air Racing Association hired him after a World War II fighter plane crashed into a crowd at a Nevada air show in 2011, killing 11 and injuring 66.

In 2013, he went to work for Allegiant Air.

After the FAA inspections that year, Allegiant executives hired Sabatini to review the airline’s operations.

In an interview, Allegiant’s leaders told the Times he assembled a team of former FAA employees to study how Allegiant ran its airline.

They said his team reviewed Allegiant’s practices and made suggestions for improving communication among the company’s departments. He also evaluated its staffing levels and recommended it invest more money in its operations.

They said he returned in 2015 to check on the company’s progress.

Then, as the FAA was beginning its latest examination of Allegiant in April, the airline brought him back.

Allegiant officials declined to describe what Sabatini’s team found during that visit, other than to say he identified more ways that Allegiant could improve and the company was putting them into practice.

In his letter Friday to Pinellas County leaders, Gallagher, Allegiant’s CEO, called the FAA evaluation “an exhaustive, top-to-bottom review and audit of all of our operating procedures and practices.”

“The report, completed by FAA experts trained for this purpose, speaks for itself,” Gallagher wrote.

In it, the FAA cited Allegiant only for minor problems.

Times staff writers William R. Levesque and Anthony Cormier and researcher Carolyn Edds contributed to this report. Contact Nathaniel Lash at nlash@tampabay.com.

Follow @Nat_Lash. Contact Michael LaForgia at mlaforgia@tampabay.com. Follow @laforgia_.

Breakdown of Oversight | 3 | Tampa Bay Times
IN LOCAL
A weird year, even for Florida
Take a look back at some of the unusual events in the Sunshine State in 2016. 

IN BUSINESS
Homing in on scams
A Michigan man offers a cautionary tale about renting properties here from Craigslist.

IN LATITUDES
Celebrating a natural beauty
Everglades National Park is adorned in the crowns of the National Park Service.

IN PERSPECTIVE
2016: A year for the books
We pick 12 events that might seem insignificant now but may hold value in the future.

IN BUSINESS
Homes in on scams
A Michigan man offers a cautionary tale about renting properties here from Craigslist.

IN LATITUDES
Celebrating a natural beauty
Everglades National Park is adorned in the crowns of the National Park Service.

IN PERSPECTIVE
2016: A year for the books
We pick 12 events that might seem insignificant now but may hold value in the future.

TODAY'S WEATHER
Highs in the mid to upper 70s. Lows in the upper 50s to low 60s. 

INDEX
Allegiant shares ValuJet blueprint

Both budget airlines grew with cheap fares and used jets. A crash doomed one, and the other is prone to breakdowns.

By Nathaniel Lash, William R. Levesque and Anthony Cormier
Times Staff Writers

ValuJet broke into the airline industry in 1993 with a distinctive business model: offer ultra-cheap fares to undercut larger competitors and attract new customers who otherwise couldn't afford to fly.

It did so by acquiring second-hand planes from all over the world. It operated them as cheaply as it could, paying workers far less than others in the industry.

For three years, the strategy paid off big. ValuJet became one of the most profitable airlines in the U.S.

Then, on May 11, 1996, Flight 592 caught fire and crashed into the Florida Everglades, killing all 110 people on board. The ValuJet name was irreparably tarnished.

For the past 15 years, one of ValuJet's founders, Maurice Gallagher Jr., has been using the same basic business blueprint — relying on used airplanes to fuel rapid growth — to transform Allegiant Air from one of the largest carriers in the U.S.

The result is an airline more profitable than any other, but also more likely to break down in midair.

Former federal aviation experts, including those who investigated the 1996 crash, say Allegiant toes the line between mechanical reliability and profitability in some ways that remind them of ValuJet.

To compare the two airlines, the Tampa Bay Times reviewed securities filings and hundreds of pages of federal reports on the deadly crash and interviewed aviation experts, former federal officials and ValuJet and Allegiant employees.

Five key ValuJet figures, including...
three of the company's four founders, made their way to Allegiant as it emerged out of bankruptcy.

Allegiant Air CEO Maurice Gallagher Jr. acknowledged.

At ValuJet, the company grew so fast that it was not able to hire enough qualified mechanics and inspectors. Under Gallagher's tenure as chief executive officer, Allegiant has expanded to nearly 120 cities, an expansion that even he acknowledged put a strain on its operations.

Like ValuJet did before it, Allegiant built up its fleet with second-hand planes from foreign companies that wound up breaking down more often than those flown by other major carriers.

Before the 1996 crash, ValuJet had a string of mechanical breakdowns, including a 1995 engine explosion on a runway in Atlanta, according to federal investigators and news reports.

Last month, the Times used a first-of-its-kind database to show that Allegiant's planes are four times as likely to break down in midair as those flown by all other major U.S. airlines.

In an email to Allegiant officials on Dec. 5, the Times described this story in detail and asked the company, through a spokeswoman, for comment. The company declined.

On Dec. 16, a lobbyist for Allegiant emailed a letter to Pinellas County public officials in which Gallagher appealed directly to the local leaders.

“I expect the Times will continue to trot out more of the same, misleading storylines as they have in the past,” Gallagher wrote. “They will attempt to paint me, as well as our team members, as indifferent, or something worse, with regard to safety.”

In an October interview with the Times in Las Vegas, Gallagher acknowledged similarities between the business models of Allegiant and ValuJet.

Both companies expanded quickly. Both competed against larger airlines by offering low airfares. Both targeted customers on vacation, rather than business.

As a model, Gallagher said, both were successful. But he said neither was unsafe. He said that the run-up to the 1996 crash “was a completely different set of facts than anything we’ve ever had” at Allegiant.

Gallagher and other former ValuJet officials say the blame belongs to a maintenance contractor, not the airline itself.

“It is what it is,” he told the Times. “If you guys stopped talking about it, that’d be fine, too. But that’s not what you do.”

No Allegiant plane has ever crashed.

In his letter to Pinellas officials, Gallagher acknowledged “delays and turn backs” in 2015 but said the company “operates at the highest levels of
safety.”

Seven aviation experts, including former federal officials, interviewed by the Times said Allegiant exhibits some of the same traits as ValuJet, and the Federal Aviation Administration should take note.

“ValuJet, before the big accident in the Everglades, had a number of aircraft that had to return to the field because of maintenance problems that at that time were the highest in the industry,” said John Goglia, the National Transportation Safety Board member who chaired the public hearing into the 1996 crash. “And what we see here today in history, what we see with Allegiant, is that same kind of pattern repeating itself.”

Growing fast

The ValuJet crash left the American flying public deeply rattled.

The likely cause was listed as a fire that started in the cargo hold, sparked by oxygen canisters that were improperly packed by ValuJet’s contract maintenance workers.

But federal investigators also found that a push for rapid growth put so much pressure on the company’s maintenance programs that mistakes were more likely to occur.

“It is apparent now that the extraordinarily rapid growth of this airline created problems that should have been more clearly recognized and dealt with sooner and more aggressively,” said then-FAA administrator David Hinson at the opening of congressional hearings on the FAA and ValuJet.

From 1993 to 1996, ValuJet's fleet expanded from two planes to 52. In one 14-month period, the airline went from operating eight flights a day to four cities to running 124 flights to 17 cities.

As the Atlanta-based company expanded, its stock price soared. In the fall of 1995, shares of ValuJet hit $34.75, up from $12.50 at the initial public offering about a year earlier.

“I used to listen to the business channel on the way home every day,” said the company’s former president, Lewis Jordan, the sole ValuJet founder who did not go on to manage Allegiant. “If our stock price wasn’t up significantly, we would be quite disappointed.”

But company insiders soon were becoming concerned.

In the 1997 postmortem of the crash, the NTSB found that one senior vice president complained to his supervisor in 1995 about “sloppiness due to rapid growth.” Mechanics described “a great deal of pressure” to get planes back in the air.
Newly hired contractors and employees had little experience and earned low pay, according to the NTSB report.

Former executives, including Gallagher, expressed regret over the crash, but also defended the ValuJet business model.

“One mistake we made at ValuJet — that Maury didn’t make at Allegiant — is that we grew too fast,” said Robert Priddy, the former ValuJet chairman who had been on the Allegiant board until last year.

**Allegiant takes off**

Six years after the crash, Gallagher brought ValuJet’s business model to a new airline.

When he took over in 2001, Allegiant had just four planes. The company added two dozen over the next four years.

“Just about everybody else says, ‘We’re going to buy expensive aircraft that are relatively reliable because they’re new,’” Allegiant’s chief operating officer, Jude Bricker, told the Times. “We just kind of built up under a different philosophy, largely because we started off with just a few million dollars.”

“That’s all we had.”

As the fleet expanded, so did the number of passengers. The airline transported 80,000 people in 2002. By 2004, that number had climbed to 539,000, and tripled by 2006 when it hit 1.9 million.

Last year, nearly half of Allegiant’s 86 jets broke down at least once, and mechanical problems forced at least 77 unexpected landings across the country. The FAA conducted a review earlier this year and concluded the company had “minor” problems that it planned to address.

In his letter to Pinellas leaders, Gallagher described the examination as an “exhaustive, top-to-bottom review and audit of all of our operating procedures and practices” that “speaks for itself.”

In interviews with the Times, Allegiant executives acknowledged the company grew too fast.

“We’re going to slow down growth so we can get back on top of reliability,” Bricker said. “It’s probably worthwhile.”

Company officials said they are installing safety procedures to identify minor issues before they become major ones. They also plan to upgrade the fleet by purchasing new planes. In the letter to Pinellas County, Gallagher said the FAA’s recent inspection found no evidence “Allegiant is an unsafe airline.”

**‘Midas touch’**

Gallagher has been in the aviation industry since he earned an MBA at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1974. He says he has “kerosene in his blood,” ran a successful California airline in the 1980s and joined with two others in 1992 to invest $1 million and launch ValuJet.

He was the second of the founding members to sell significant shares after the 1996 crash. As the stock was falling, Gallagher walked away with at least $8 million, according to news reports at the time.

In a few years, Gallagher was poised to take over an airline again.

Unable to keep up with rising fuel costs, Allegiant — then a California-based charter service — filed for bankruptcy in December 2000. Gallagher loaned the fledgling company about $2 million and, as its largest creditor, emerged with near total control of the company in 2001.

From the start, he imbued the place with a ValuJet-like sensibility.

Executives bragged about saving money by building their own office furniture, just like ValuJet’s leaders had.

Both airlines offered low prices...
to entice customers who normally wouldn't fly.
Both operated only a few flights per week between cities, and hired staff mechanics at only a handful of airports where it flies.
Allegiant also bought used planes from foreign carriers like ValuJet did.
Soon the company was on a path toward 55 straight profitable quarters, a streak that still remains unbroken.
“Maury has the Midas touch,” said Priddy, the ValuJet cofounder and former chairman. “He knows how to make money.”
After he took over Allegiant, the airline began doing business with other companies that he had a stake in — firms that had little or nothing to do with aviation. Investors questioned many of these deals, saying there is no way to tell whether the arrangement is good for the company or just good for Gallagher.
Securities filings show Allegiant paid at least $26 million to companies in which Gallagher is an investor or manager.
The airline paid at least $15 million to lease its headquarters from real estate companies partly controlled by Gallagher, Timothy Flynn and John Redmond.
Flynn served on the Allegiant board from 2006 to 2013; Redmond is a current board member.
It paid $3.2 million to Alpine Labs, a TV production company co-founded by Gallagher, to produce an on-plane game show.
It paid more than $1 million to sponsor a professional truck racing team controlled by Gallagher. His son, Spencer, is one of the team’s seven drivers.
These transactions were approved by Allegiant’s board members but drew criticism from at least one investor. The head of CtW Investment Group, which invests money from union pensions, sent two letters in the past 20 months asking whether the board was truly independent of Gallagher.
One board member, Redmond, did outside business with Gallagher while two others — Gary Ellmer and Linda Marvin — worked with him at a different airline in the past, wrote CtW executive director Dieter Waizenegger.
CtW is a coalition of unions, includ-
S E E  S C H O O L S ,  6 A


tampabay.com

rt the pdf or click here to read online

Published January 23, 2016

If you go
tampabay.com

11 a.m. to 7

ART. HOURS ARE THROUGH MAY 15.

THE EXHIBITION

HUMAN LANDSCAPES

J A U M E  P L E N S A :

IF YOU GO

COMICS

BUSINESS

ASTROLOGY

INDEX

Gasparilla Extravaganza and more, dining and the arts. Get it's the weekend...

Washington D.C. was a winter wonderland Friday as snowdrifts piled up everywhere. It seemed like snow was falling from the air, but with the cold fronts out, it was the result of humidity and cloud cover.

The aircraft also made an emergency landing in Sanford, outside Orlando, departing Youngstown, Ohio, for Sanford, outside Orlando, going through a high number of incidents in a short amount of time.

One in seven Americans could get at least a cold this winter.

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers for ideas for movie stars led the Gasparilla Music Festival lineup, R&B star Erykah Badu leads the 2016 Gasparilla Music Festival lineup.

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers for ideas for movie stars led the Gasparilla Music Festival lineup, R&B star Erykah Badu leads the 2016 Gasparilla Music Festival lineup.
Allegiant Air Flight 815 had just departed North Carolina on Dec. 3 with 94 passengers bound for St. Pete-Clearwater International Airport when an alarming gray haze began to fill the cockpit and passenger cabin. Pilots declared an emergency, telling the tower to notify fire rescue crews “to roll the trucks.” The haze dissipated on landing at Raleigh-Durham, N.C., and the problem was traced to a malfunctioning air-conditioning system.

Mechanics knew the aircraft quite well: This was the fourth emergency landing by the same aircraft in little more than a month.

The emergency landings by the MD-88 — tail number 403NV — occurred from Oct. 25 to Dec. 3 on flights headed to Florida, all after reports of smoke or fumes in the aircraft. Some of the incidents may have been because of the same recurring problem, according to interviews and Federal Aviation Administration records.

The aircraft also made an emergency landing in August due to engine trouble that did not involve a report of smoke.

Industry veterans say such a high number of incidents for one aircraft in such a short period of time is exceptionally rare, and the incidents will undoubtedly raise renewed concern about Allegiant’s maintenance operations.

During an Oct. 25 emergency landing on a flight departing Youngstown, Ohio, for Sanford, outside Orlando, an FAA report filed by Allegiant noted, “Smoke was so thick that the flight attendants in the back of the airplane could not see the front.”

John Cox, a St. Petersburg resident who is a former U.S. Airways pilot and a former safety official at the Air Line Pilots Association, said it is rare to see one plane make so many emergency landings.

“To have one aircraft experience a high number of smoke events, that is very, very unusual,” Cox said. “I have seen smoke or fume events reoccur. But if they had repeated smoke events in a five- or six-week period, this would be very unusual and would be right at the edge of anything I’ve seen in my career.”

Allegiant has maintained the Las Vegas-based airline has one of the best safety records in the industry. A spokeswoman with the airline said Friday that company officials could not comment on this story because they were busy dealing with a snow storm in the eastern United States.

Allegiant, a budget airline with a fleet of more than 80 aircraft, was responsible for about 95 percent of the record 1.6 million passengers who used the St. Pete-Clearwater airport last year, making it a key player in the area’s growing tourism industry.

Allegiant’s chief operating officer Steve Harfst abruptly resigned a week ago after just 13 months on the job. Some analysts suggest the resignation was forced and is a result of highly publicized incidents involving Allegiant aircraft. The airline and Harfst will not comment on such speculation.

Those incidents include an additional five emergency landings by Allegiant aircraft during the last week of 2015.

Allegiant announced late Thursday that it was promoting its senior vice president of planning, Jude Bricker, to COO as Harfst’s replacement.

Chris Moore, chairman of the Teamsters Aviation Mechanics Coalition, discovered the four emergency landings for the one aircraft while taking reports from Allegiant crew members on behalf of the pilots’
union, the Airline Professionals Association Teamsters Local 1224.

The Tampa Bay Times confirmed those four by examining “service difficulty reports,” or SDRs, Allegiant filed with the FAA. And the newspaper discovered the August emergency in those records. It does not appear any passengers or crew were injured in the incidents.

Moore is compiling a report on the airline’s maintenance issues for the Teamsters, which has been at odds with Allegiant management over bitter contract negotiations. The airline has blamed the union for raising unfounded safety concerns as a ploy in negotiations.

Moore said in an interview that the issues with the one aircraft raise serious questions on how well Allegiant maintains its fleet. Moore said the FAA has placed Allegiant under increased scrutiny due to these issues, though the agency won’t confirm that.

“I’m sure the FAA is seeing what we are and asking, ‘What’s going on?’ ” Moore said.

He said he believed, though he had not been able to confirm, that the four emergencies may have involved a recurring problem that was not properly diagnosed or which recurred after inadequate repairs.

FAA spokesman Ian Gregor declined to comment specifically about the aircraft with the multiple problems, though he said the FAA is investigating incidents reported in the media.

According to Moore and FAA records on the aircraft (all flights landed at the city from which they departed), these are the incidents:

• On Oct. 25, Allegiant Flight 607 departed Youngstown for Sanford when the crew smelled smoke at rotation, the moment when an aircraft begins to lift off the runway. Flight attendants then reported smoke coming from a fan that delivered air into the cabin from the plane’s air system. Air-conditioning was turned off and the aircraft safely landed.

• On Oct. 30, Flight 730 had just departed Concord Regional Airport in North Carolina bound for Fort Lauderdale when flight attendants reported smoke in the cabin. Mechanics replaced the oil filter and an O-ring on an auxiliary power unit, and found a leak in the hydraulic system.

• On Nov. 15, shortly after Flight 715 departed Owensboro-Daviess County Regional Airport in Kentucky for Sanford a bathroom smoke detector alarm began sounding. The FAA report said “there was a haze in the cabin with a smoke smell.” The problem was diagnosed as occurring in an air-conditioning system.

• On the Dec. 3 flight to St. Pete-Clearwater, the problem was again tied to the air-conditioning.

• On Aug. 17, the plane suffered engine difficulties at 16,000 feet and made an emergency landing. No report of smoke occurred on that flight, and records do not show where the plane landed, its destination nor city of departure.

FAA records also show the aircraft’s crew on Dec. 15 experienced the smell of evaporating oil in the cockpit, but FAA records indicate the crew did not make an emergency landing for that event.

Cox said airlines usually will take an aircraft out of service after repeated problems to conduct a detailed examination. He said mechanics can sometimes fix a problem on an aircraft only to later discover the real issue has been missed.

Greg Marino is an aviation mechanic with more than three decades of experience who said he quit the airline’s Sanford maintenance operation in October after just two weeks because of what he viewed as Allegiant’s poor maintenance culture. Allegiant disputes his characterization.

Marino said when he worked at US Airways, repeat problems on an aircraft would be quick reason to ground it.

“We wouldn’t have gotten three chances,” Marino said, referring to the four emergency landings in a month. “We may have gotten two, meaning the airplane would have been grounded ... This is a clear indication of an experience level that is going to cause a big problem for Allegiant.”

Times researcher John Martin contributed to this report. Contact William R. Levesque at levesque@Tampabay.com. Follow @Times_Levesque.