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# Des Moines airport to privatize its firefighting services

Wisconsin company will replace departing Air National Guard unit

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F-16 from the Iowa Air National Guard's 132nd Fighter Wing takes off during a training flight. The guard's fire department will disband later this year when the guard stops flying jets from Des Moines. / Christopher Gannon/The Register

Written by



Joel Aschbrenner

Des Moines airport officials voted Tuesday to privatize the airport's fire protection services, a move that drew protests from union leaders and a city councilman.

The vote ended a labor dispute that erupted last month when the airport announced plans to hire Pro-Tec Fire Services, a Wisconsin firefighting company that serves nearly 20 other airports nationwide. Pro-Tec will replace the Iowa Air National Guard's fire department, which will disband later this year when the guard stops flying jets from Des Moines.

Union members asked the airport to create its own fire department and hire Air Guard firefighters, but airport officials opted for a private contractor, saying they were not in the business of managing a fire department.

The debate often focused on how many firefighters would serve the airport. Pro-Tec would employ about 10 firefighters and have three on duty at all times, while the National Guard employed about 30, with five to seven on duty.

"The fact is aircraft do come down ... and we need to be staffed for when that does happen, and three personnel is just not enough," said Gary Sanders, a National Guard firefighter.

Airport Executive Director Don Smithey, however, said the staffing levels would exceed federal regulations that require two firefighters on duty. More firefighters are required when military aircraft are flying.

Danny Homan, president of AFSCME Iowa Council 61, which represents the guard firefighters, claimed Pro-Tec would be required to douse flames, not provide medical assistance.

"They will spray chemical on the crash and they will drive around people lying on the ground," he said.

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### New airport director named

Kevin Foley, the Des Moines International Airport's second-in-command, has been named executive director.

On Tuesday, the Airport Authority Board appointed Foley to replace Don Smithey, who is retiring Friday after four years at the airport.

Foley serves as assistant executive director and general manager. He came to the Des Moines airport eight years ago after working at Dubuque Regional Airport.

Foley is taking over an operation that under Smithey added flights and saw passenger numbers grow to record numbers.

Three other candidates applied for the job, which has a \$160,000 salary.

Smithey endorsed Foley. "I think you could look nationwide and not find anyone better than Kevin," he said.

An Iowa farm boy, Foley grew up near Belle Plaine and farmed with his wife before deciding to go to aviation school during the 1980s farm crisis.

He previously worked as a commercial pilot and was an associate professor of aviation at the University of Dubuque.

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Carl W. Thiem, general manager with Pro-Tec, said that was not true. “If we can rescue someone, we will,” he said. “It’s the flight crew’s primary role to get passengers off the plane. It’s our job to clear a path through the fuel so they can get those passengers out.”

The Airport Authority Board voted unanimously for the two-year contract with Pro-Tec, which starts at \$921,000 a year.

The board amended the contract to require one paramedic on duty, rather than EMTs, which have a lower level of medical training. Des Moines Fire Chief John TeKippe had raised concerns that city firefighters would be called to the airport more often if no paramedic was on duty.

The airport’s firefighters cover the airfield, while city firefighters serve the terminal.

Union members also raised concerns about wages, claiming Pro-Tec firefighters at other airports make less than \$10 an hour.

“We don’t need any more low-wage jobs in our community,” said Mark Cooper, president of South Central Iowa Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO. “We are already overburdened with those types of jobs.”

Thiem said Pro-Tec’s firefighters generally make a starting salary of \$40,000 to \$45,000 a year.

City Councilman Skip Moore asked the airport board to delay the decision. Airport officials said they needed to approve a contract so Pro-Tec will be ready when the Guard fire department leaves.

“If we are not up and ready, we effectively close the airport,” said airport board member Mark Feldmann.

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