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# No Permanent FAA Funding Makes Planning Tough for Airports

By George Ford, Reporter



The Eastern Iowa Airport, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. (GAZETTE ARCHIVES)

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CEDAR RAPIDS, Iowa - Lack of permanent funding for the Federal Aviation Administration keeps regional airport directors guessing when trying to plan major capital improvement projects.

The FAA, which partially shut down briefly last summer when temporary funding expired, is poised for a repeat on Jan. 31 if the U.S. House and Senate cannot agree on a permanent reauthorization bill or temporary extension. The agency provides the majority of the money for airport runway and safety improvement projects.

The FAA has not been permanently funded by Congress since the last reauthorization bill expired in 2007. It has operated under consecutive continuing resolutions — including No. 22 in September — as Congress has wrestled with issues like subsidized airline service for small communities and a change in the way labor unions are able to organize airline employees.

Tim Bradshaw, director of The Eastern Iowa Airport in Cedar Rapids, said lack of a permanent FAA reauthorization bill can increase the cost of capital improvement projects, which are funded by federal airport improvement program grants and local revenue from a passenger facility charge.

“When we go out for bids and get these projects lined up, we try to get the bidders to hold their prices for a specific period of time,” Bradshaw said. “Sometimes we can’t get them to hold their prices, so we have to go out again for bids. That’s one of the risks you run when you’re not sure when the money will be available.”

Bradshaw said \$3.5 million of FAA airport improvement program funds have been appropriated by the FAA for projects at The Eastern Iowa Airport in the current fiscal year, but the funding has not been authorized by Congress.

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“We will go out for bids and do lots of planning because these projects involve coordination so they do not interfere with operations,” Bradshaw said. “In the end, if Congress does not authorize the spending, it’s all for nothing,”

The Eastern Iowa Airport has several major capital improvement projects planned over the next several years that would qualify for funding from the airport improvement program, including reconstruction of the airport’s secondary runway in two phases (\$7.6 million in fiscal 2013), construction of a new taxiway (\$10.3 million in fiscal 2014) and renovation of the passenger terminal’s security checkpoint (\$3.8 million in fiscal 2015).

Bradshaw said the latter project is needed to expand the checkpoint for more efficient passenger flow and to accommodate new screening technology used by the Transportation Security Administration.

“We’re getting the whole body imaging unit here in the next couple of months, which will require space that we don’t have,” Bradshaw said. “We’re wringing our hands and scratching our heads as to how we’re going to fit that machine in the small amount of space we have in the checkpoint.”

Bradshaw said the city-owned airport, which does not receive local property tax revenue, was fortunate to secure FAA letters of intent to complete a \$46.8 million reconstruction of its 8,600-foot main runway and intersection with the secondary runway in 2010. The project provided a significant number of construction jobs with area subcontractors.

Bruce Carter, director of the Quad City International Airport in Moline, Ill., said a similar FAA entitlement funding guarantee enabled the airport to complete a \$34 million reconstruction of its main 10,000-foot runway in September. A \$1.6 million project in the late spring will convert a temporary runway into a new taxiway.

While saying Quad City International has no airport improvement program-eligible projects of similar size planned for the near future, Carter called the inability of Congress to craft and pass a permanent FAA reauthorization bill “very disappointing.”

“We just work out what we think is going to happen with the FAA and the state, but we need a long-term funding bill,” Carter said. “We need a permanent reauthorization bill so we can plan for three to five years with some certainty of funding.”

While Bradshaw and Carter are hopeful that Congress can resolve issues holding up a reauthorization bill, Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W.VA., chairman of the Senate Transportation Committee, says passage of a bill is unlikely before Jan. 31 and the issue could get pushed beyond the November election into 2013.

“This industry, if we are real about it, has very few friends on the Hill and they don’t understand how much the economy is tied to aviation.” Rockefeller said in a mid-November speech to the Aero Club of Washington.

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