

THE HILL

October 1, 2003

BUSINESS & LOBBYING

Rural airports at risk in FAA bill, lawmakers say
Peterson, Boyd lead effort to nix section of bill

By Josephine Hearn

A bipartisan group of rural lawmakers is mounting a campaign against a provision added in conference to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) bill that they say would jeopardize passenger air service to rural airports.

Their objection joins a litany of complaints about the conference report that has left FAA reauthorization in disarray since July, when the report was released.

Reps. John Peterson (R-Pa.) and Allen Boyd (D-Fla.), co-chairs of the Congressional Rural Caucus, are leading the effort to nix a section of the report that would establish a cost-sharing program requiring a handful of small airports to help pay for the Essential Air Service (EAS), an assistance program created in 1978 to preserve rural air service after deregulation.



file photo

Rep. John Peterson (R-Pa.) hopes to send the FAA report back to conference without cost-sharing provision.

Although the lawmakers concede that the cost-sharing issue is small — payments would amount to \$50,000 to \$100,000 for each of 10 airports — they are hoping it can ride on the coattails of a larger movement, mostly backed by Democrats, to have the report sent back to conference.

Their protests have centered on language in the report that would allow the FAA to privatize staff in air traffic control towers.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young (R-Alaska) planned to meet yesterday afternoon with Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, to discuss the conference report's fate.

The House could act as early as today on a motion to recommit the bill to conference. Congress originally had faced a reauthorization deadline of Sept. 30, but a continuing resolution passed last Thursday extended FAA funding through Oct. 31.

Last Thursday, Peterson and Boyd sent a letter signed by 35 House members to Sen. Ernest “Fritz” Hollings (D-S.C.), Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.), McCain and Young, all members of the conference committee, urging them to remove the program.

“Rural airports don’t have that kind of income stream [to make the co-payments],” Peterson said.

Sen. Jeff Bingaman (D-N.M.) is circulating a similar letter in the Senate. He also is considering an amendment to the transportation spending bill that would attempt to block the cost-sharing program by barring its federal funding.

Rural lawmakers are especially disturbed by the cost-sharing provision because similar measures were explicitly removed from the House and Senate versions of the FAA bill before they were passed.

In May, the House approved by voice vote an amendment offered by Reps. John McHugh (R-N.Y.), Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) and Peterson to strike a cost-sharing provision from the original House bill (H.R. 2114). The Senate approved by voice vote a similar amendment, proposed by Bingaman, to eliminate the measure from the Senate bill (S. 824).

Observers believe that the provision was reinserted by Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.) at the urging of the administration, which has consistently indicated a desire for some form of cost-sharing by rural airports.

Lott’s office did not immediately return a call for comment.

“It was absolutely the administration,” said Maurice Parker, executive director of Regional Air Partners, a lobbying group representing airport authorities, businesses and chambers of commerce with a stake in rural aviation. “We think that there is a concerted effort to eliminate the Essential Air Service in its entirety,” he said.

“We won on the House and Senate floor and then they reversed it,” said Bob Fogel of the National Association of Counties.

Under the pilot program, 10 airports, which have not been named, would have to pony up a 10 percent co-payment on EAS funds allotted for them. EAS funds are not paid directly to airports but to private air carriers — US Airways Express, for example — to enable them to operate a route they would otherwise eliminate.

“The small communities cannot afford to pay any form of cost sharing from their local budgets,” Parker said.

In a process parallel to the cost-sharing issue, conferees reinserted provisions allowing air traffic control privatization even after similar measures had been stricken earlier from House and Senate versions of the bill. The administration had threatened to veto the bill if it did not permit privatization.

In conference, Young had okayed the privatization provision while simultaneously adding extra measures to ensure that airports in his home state of Alaska would be exempted, a move that incensed Democrats.

Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) has threatened to filibuster the report.

Union groups such as the National Air Traffic Controllers Association and the AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Division have opposed privatization, as have consumer groups Public Citizen and Consumers Union.

House Appropriations Committee Chairman C.W. Bill Young (R-Fla.) voiced opposition to the report because it would discard a limit set on the number of airport baggage screeners.