



Improving airport capacity still seen as vital transportation need

by Laura Kliewer

Controversy over whether to expand O'Hare International Airport or build new airport capacity elsewhere has dominated periods of Illinois politics for years. This summer, nationwide flight delays blamed on O'Hare, subsequent congressional pressure and the continued opposition to expansion by airport neighbors brought that debate to a head.

Then, in September, discussions on the issue were temporarily silenced following the tragic terrorist hijackings of four passenger airplanes. Ensuring the stability, safety and security of air travel immediately superseded all other transportation concerns. Illinois Republican Gov. George Ryan and a coalition of business and civic leaders called on Congress to pass a financial assistance package to aid the beleaguered airlines.

But the governor also made it clear that the future of O'Hare Airport is still a critical regional issue that must be resolved. "We may have been distracted in recent days, but we have not been deterred one bit from building for the future," Ryan said shortly after the attacks.

Balance of power

The importance of O'Hare as a regional and national transportation hub has stimulated interest among many policymakers. As a result, it has created some interesting questions about the balance of power between the city, state and federal government.

The Illinois Aeronautics Act, enacted in 1945, requires approval by the governor's transportation department before an Illinois city attempts to "make any alteration or extension of an existing airport or restricted landing area." This state law, along with the organized and vocal opposition from those who live near O'Hare, has prevented expansion efforts for years.

This year, federal lawmakers began pressing for a solution to O'Hare's congestion, which they believe disrupts air travel across the country. The U.S. Senate and House have introduced identical bills, titled "End Gridlock at Our Nation's Critical Airports Act of 2001." Sponsored by U.S. Rep. William Lipinski, a Democrat from Illinois, and Sen. Charles Grassley, a Republican from Iowa, the bills would amend federal aviation law and pre-empt state legislation that requires approval prior to the construction or operation of certain airport development projects.

Speaking against the federal legislation at an August hearing, Ryan said: "This attempt at a shotgun marriage will take Congress and the states down a dangerous path. It will send a stern and unwise message to all other states that your territory is not your own if Congress doesn't like what you're doing with it."

While Chicago Democratic Mayor Richard Daley has said he hopes the issue can be solved

locally, he also believes the governor's current veto power is a violation of interstate commerce laws.

In June, Daley offered a blueprint to add a new O'Hare runway and realign three others. The additional runway and relocation of three existing runways would almost double the airport's capacity. City officials say the plan would cost about \$6 billion (a figure questioned by state officials) and would reduce overall delays by 79 percent. As proposed, the expansion would be funded through a mix of money from the federal government, airline ticket fees and airline-backed bonds.

Ryan has long favored the development of a third airport in the Chicago area, arguing that an expanded O'Hare would not meet the region's transportation demands. He has promised to deliver a counterproposal to Daley's plan. That pledge had averted any congressional action through mid-September.

"The governor doesn't have a set date [for unveiling the proposal]," Dennis Culloton, press secretary for Ryan, said last month. "At an appropriate time, he will unveil a proposal for the region's air transportation. It's simply a matter of timing. Once we have addressed the current crisis the airlines find themselves in, we will focus our attention back to regional transportation issues. We will not allow terrorism to cripple a critical industry or deter us."

Loud opposition

Saying he wanted to hear from the public before offering a counterproposal, Ryan held four hearings this August in communities close to O'Hare. His message at the hearings always included plans to build an airport in Peotone, a town about 40 miles south of Chicago. His statements this summer also have indicated that the counterproposal will likely contain at least some components of Daley's plan, much to the consternation of many who live near O'Hare.

State Republican Reps. Rosemary Mulligan of Des Plaines and Carolyn Krause of Mount Prospect also held hearings earlier this year. Mulligan, whose northwest suburban Chicago district borders O'Hare, says there is a wide range of anti-expansion sentiment, from slightly ambivalent to adamantly against. O'Hare's expansion opponents complain that more

runways at the current airport will cause more noise and congestion along with the loss of homes and businesses. Mulligan and others

also have raised concerns about pollution and other health hazards that an expanded O'Hare could bring to the area.

"How much can we put in without really having an impact on people?" she asks, adding that road and public transportation improvements need to take place regardless of whether O'Hare expands.


Some leading state lawmakers believe construction of a third airport in Peotone is the most appropriate solution to the current capacity problem. The state has already set aside \$45 million to purchase land for the potential future site and has entered into negotia-

tions with some property owners. Peotone is on the Federal Aviation Administration's list of airport projects that might be eligible for federal funds. The FAA also has given preliminary approval to Ryan's proposal, saying the site passed several environmental and noise level tests.

Critics of Ryan's plan say Peotone is too far from Chicago and that no major airlines have committed to the site. In addition, many residents near the proposed site vehemently oppose construction.

The FAA report that gave a first thumbs-up to the Peotone site ruled out another idea for improving airport capacity in the Chicago area: expanding the roles of existing airports in Gary, Ind.; Rockford, Ill.; or Milwaukee.

Whether Congress will still act to strip the governor of his veto power is uncertain. Republican Speaker Dennis Hastert of Illinois indicated that he would allow a House vote on the legislation, but neither bill has passed out of committee. In August, U.S. Republican Sen. Peter Fitzgerald of Illinois was successful in having a provision attached to an aviation bill that would prevent Congress from stripping Ryan of his power. That bill passed out of committee.

In a Sept. 5 speech before the United Business Association of Midway, Lipinski said his federal legislation would move forward, despite ongoing talks between Daley and Ryan. 

World's busiest airports

The Midwest was home to four of the 12 busiest airports in the world in 2000, according to statistics that calculate the total number of aircraft takeoffs and landings.

Airport	Total movements
Hartsfield Atlanta	915,657
Chicago O'Hare	908,989
Dallas/Fort Worth	837,779
Phoenix Sky Harbor	636,848
Los Angeles	560,878
Detroit Metropolitan	555,375
Minneapolis/St. Paul	523,014
Paris Charles DeGaulle	517,657
Miami	517,440
Las Vegas-McCarran	515,293
Denver	509,092
Cincinnati	486,671

Source: Airports Council International