



Rural airports face bumpy ride

Subsidies in jeopardy

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President Donald Trump's proposed 2018 budget would eliminate federal subsidies for rural airports, throwing the future of the Altoona-Blair County Airport's services into uncertainty, officials said Friday.

Trump's proposed budget, released this week, slashes funds for the U.S. Department of Transportation. Among the cuts is the \$175 million Essential Air Service program, which subsidizes airline tickets in rural communities that might otherwise go without airline coverage.

"There is a real threat each year, and each year I think it's more and more and more of a real threat of it coming to pass," Airport Authority Board Chairman Gary Orner said.

Blair County is among the program's beneficiaries, with the airport receiving more than \$2 million each year — more than \$400 per passenger — to keep flights operating here. The program was established in the 1970s, after airline deregulation threatened to deprive swaths of rural America of any air transportation.

Trump's budget would cut the program entirely, leaving areas that use the subsidies to find other means to fund airlines or to cut service.

"EAS flights are not full and have high subsidy costs per passenger," the budget summary states. "Several EAS-eligible communities are relatively close to major airports, and communities that have EAS could be served by other existing modes of transportation."

In addition to Altoona, airports in Johnstown, DuBois and other parts of the state use Essential Air Service funds.

U.S. Rep. Bill Shuster, R-9th District, who oversees the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, backs the service and will work to ensure it survives, spokesman Casey Contres said Friday. Shuster's recent Federal Aviation Administration funding bill included money for rural air service.

Shuster has maintained contact with Trump on transportation funding, Contres said, although some of those discussions have revolved around Shuster's ongoing effort to privatize the nation's air-traffic control network.

"They've had open discussions. He's been (to the White House) several times," Contres said.

While Shuster can't unilaterally preserve the air subsidy, Contres stressed that he backs the program and will push for its inclusion in any final budget.

"I think it's important that people at home realize the chairman of the Transportation Committee is a strong supporter of the program and understands the benefits it provides our region," Contres said.

Congress has to pass an FAA reauthorization bill by September to replace the short-term bill currently keeping federal air programs running. Committee Communications Director Justin Harclerode said members are aiming for a four-year bill, although that could change amid negotiations.

Air-traffic control privatization remains a key element of that bill. The idea, which would spin control off to a not-for-profit company controlled by airlines and other stakeholders, has long been one of Shuster's goals in Congress.

Around Altoona, however, Essential Air Service subsidies could be the more pressing issue. Airport officials have planned for a possible cut to the subsidy, Orner said, and service could theoretically survive its elimination.

Southern Airways, the airport's flight provider, uses smaller aircraft that are cheaper to operate, he said. While subsidies cover the vast majority of each ticket's price, Southern Airways might still be able to fly to Pittsburgh and Baltimore-Washington International airports without them, he said.

"It's not something that we take lightly, but it's something we have been moving toward in the last three or five years — to put ourselves in the best position possible if something does take place," Orner said. "That's not saying we can, but it gives us the best opportunity."

The Trump administration's move to cut the subsidy — as well as several other well-known transportation programs — is in keeping with conservative budget groups' wishes. Aspects of the budget, which would slash many federal programs while ramping up military funding, have earned praise from right-wing groups and think tanks.

“While liberals and lobby groups will complain, individual states can fund programs such as ... EAS themselves,” Cato Institute tax policy official Chris Edwards wrote. “If EAS really is ‘essential,’ then local businesses and governments in affected communities will have a strong incentive to raise their own funding for it.”

There’s no guarantee, however, that the budget hawk wish-list will survive congressional debate. Contres noted that both Shuster and his Senate transportation counterpart, Sen. John Thune, R-S.D., hail from states that benefit from the subsidy.

“Those are the top transportation people in Congress,” he said.