



Shuster pushes proposal to privatize air traffic control

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March 6, 2017

Legislation introduced by U.S. Rep Bill Shuster, R-Everett, to privatize the nation's air traffic control system has met bipartisan opposition in the Senate.

Shuster's proposal is included in the six-year re-authorization of the Federal Aviation Administration. The Aviation Innovation, Reform and Reauthorization Act (H.R. 4441) would establish an independent, not-for-profit corporation to provide domestic air traffic control.

Air traffic controllers make sure aircraft land safely at airports across the nation.

Shuster, chairman of the House Infrastructure and Transportation Committee, proposed ATC privatization last year. The Senate failed to debate the idea. The House did not vote on it. Instead Congress extended the authorization of FAA as is, until Sept. 1.

Last year the proposal also faced the election-year publicity of Shuster's personal relationship with Airlines For America vice president Shelley Rubino.

The airline industry has been a leading contributor to Shuster's career. Airline employees and political action committees in 2015-16 contributed nearly \$300,000 to his re-election campaign and more than \$50,000 to his leadership PAC, according to OpenSecrets.org.

The Trump administration has given the idea new wings. President Trump met with airline lobbyists last month.

"The United States is falling behind and is not the aviation leader it once was," Shuster spokesman Casey Contres said. "Congressman Shuster has been in close contact with the Trump Administration on the benefits to his plan, like removing 30,000 people out of the government and making it easier to make technological upgrades that can increase safety and efficiency. The conversations with the Trump Administration have been extremely positive."

Shuster has argued that keeping the current ATC system will result in:

- More setbacks and soaring costs for failed modernization efforts.
- A bureaucracy continuing to stifle American innovation.
- A system incapable of handling growing demand.

Shuster's proposed air traffic control corporation would be governed by a board representing the users of the system and the public. Airlines for America, representing most of the largest carriers, and the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, support the privatization. Others in the industry and some lawmakers are opposed.

"The public would not be well-served by exempting any part of the FAA from annual congressional oversight," said a letter from Senate Appropriations Chairman Thad Cochran, R-Mississippi; Vice Chairman Patrick Leahy, D-Vermont; Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies Chairman Susan Collins, R-Maine, and ranking member Jack Reed, D-Rhode Island. The committee regulates government expenditures.

The letter was sent on Feb. 28 to the leadership of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation.

The FAA is upgrading its training and equipment with a satellite-based program known as NextGen.

Cochran and the other senators argue that "if air traffic control were separated during this critical period of technological advancement, the progress already being made ... would be lost. It does not appear to make sense to break apart the FAA."

"Congressman Shuster has urged members of Congress to take time to review and understand his proposal," Contres said. "It's a transformational reform, so there's going to be an education process to why this legislation is needed – and we are in that phase right now."

A report from Shuster's committee claims that the passengers, shippers and aircraft operators have seen few benefits from \$6 billion the FAA has already spent on NextGen. Projects have taken longer and cost more than originally proposed. The FAA, created in 1958, is "broken beyond repair."

"The federal government's record of failed, abandoned and delayed ATC modernization programs continues to grow," according to the report. "Between 1996 and 2014, the FAA's total budget nearly doubled, yet during this period, air traffic levels dropped by 20 percent, meaning taxpayers are now paying the FAA nearly twice as much to do only 80 percent of the work they were doing in the 1990s."

There's a conflict of interest in having the FAA operate the ATC and oversee aviation safety, according to Chris Edwards, director of tax policy at the libertarian Cato Institute.

“In coming years, rising demands for air travel are expected to severely strain the FAA,” he said. “Our airspace is getting crowded, and our antiquated ATC is causing delays and wasting fuel.”

Shuster has argued that unpredictable funding from Congress also has impeded the FAA upgrades.

Leaders on the Senate appropriations committee said that’s not true. Their committee has funded 99 percent of the administration’s request for air traffic control since 2008.

The public would not be well-served by exempting any part of the FAA from congressional oversight, the senators said. Annual oversight assures that the FAA keeps a system that works for small communities as well as large metro areas.

Shuster’s committee report said the FAA has been subject to political interference contributing to the FAA’s inability to implement NextGen.

More than 100 mayors say the proposed air traffic control board would be weighted toward interests of commercial airlines and could hurt rural communities. They sent letters to Shuster and Cochran.

The most recent FAA re-authorization was passed after 23 short-term extensions over a period of five years.