

9/11 widow, a former Pleasantville resident, calls out LoBiondo's cockpit bill

By: Joel Landau - August 6, 2013

The widow of a local pilot who died in the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks thinks U.S. Rep. Frank LoBiondo, by not supporting a proposed federal bill, is stalling her efforts to ensure all pilots are safe in the cockpit when in the air.

But the South Jersey congressman has submitted his own bill stating the issue should be handled by the Department of Homeland Security and not the Federal Aviation Administration, which his subcommittee oversees.

Ellen Saracini said LoBiondo's refusal to support bill HR-1775 and instead introduce his own measure is a "stall tactic." She said he is trying to escape jurisdiction on this issue.

The former Pleasantville resident was married to Victor Saracini, who was captain of the United 175 flight that was flown into the World Trade Center's south tower on Sept. 11 by terrorists. Now living in Yardley, Pa., Saracini got her congressman, Mike Fitzpatrick, D-Pa., to sponsor HR-1775, which would require that airplanes have a reinforced barrier inside the cockpit door to protect pilots. The barrier would protect them when the cockpit door is open on flights. The bill has 42 co-signers, she said.

John Barton, a United pilot who worked with Victor Saracini, said Congress mandated reinforced cockpit door on planes after Sept. 11, but there are times the door needs to be open, such as when pilots take breaks for restroom or meals.

United uses this type of reinforced secondary door, but some planes may just have a flight attendant stand in front when the cockpit door opens, Barton, of Lakewood, Colo., said.

"This is something we can't afford (to) happen when we're 30,000 feet in the air," he said.

Saracini said two studies have been done - by the think tank Cato Institute and RTCA Inc., a not-for-profit organization that advises the Federal Aviation Administration - that said this barrier would be the most efficient method to protect the pilots. When pilots exited the cockpit, they would have to open the new barrier and then close it before opening the cockpit door. This way the pilots would always be protected.

Saracini is campaigning for this bill and is asking LoBiondo, R-2nd, to support it. LoBiondo chairs the Aviation Subcommittee on the House of Representatives' Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. He must move the bill before it could be voted on.

LoBiondo instead introduced his own bill HR-2946. LoBiondo said the purpose of his bill is to make the issue a security one handled by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the Transportation Security Administration, instead of by the FAA.

He said the TSA must do a study to set requirements for this barrier. Under the bill backed by Saracini, LoBiondo said, the TSA still would need to examine the criteria for the barrier so his way saves time.

"The bill runs into a roadblock. The FAA will not know what standards to do," he said. "We can get six months down the road and the FAA will not know what to comply to and switch it over to Homeland Security."

LoBiondo also said the Department of Homeland Security could enact this change on its own.

"This would put it in the right spot," he said. "Legislation is not necessary."

He declined to say if he agreed with the need for this barrier stating "the experts need to determine this."

LoBiondo said he will speak with U.S. Rep. Michael McCaul, R-Texas, chairman of the House Committee on Homeland Security - about the issue.

Saracini spoke with LoBiondo about his bill but said she thinks the congressman is making it a security issue, so it would be moved to another committee.

Saracini classified LoBiondo's bill as a "stall tactic" and said the studies have been done, so the TSA does not need to do another one. It should be handled by the FAA, which regulates aircraft and thus under the jurisdiction of LoBiondo's aviation subcommittee, not Homeland Security, she said.

"He wants to throw it out of his committee," she said. "There are sharks in the water in Atlantic City, and LoBiondo has his head in the sand. If he wants to stall, then shame on him. "

She said she is not swayed one bit by LoBiondo's actions.

"It's the right bill in the right place," she said.