

## Congress goes home, keeping FAA funding up in the air

By CURTIS TATE AND DANIEL LIPPMAN  
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Barely a day after the dust cleared from the long, bruising battle over raising the debt ceiling, Democrats and Republicans in Congress launched their next war of words, this time over a once-routine reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration.

Congress has passed 20 short-term funding bills for the agency since 2007 without much controversy. But because Senate Democrats object to certain provisions that Republicans in the House of Representatives attached to the current legislation to keep the FAA functioning, it's turned into a stalemate, with neither side backing down.

The Senate went into recess Tuesday without acting on the House bill, and Congress isn't scheduled to return until after Labor Day. While the impasse won't affect the flying public, it leaves thousands of FAA employees without paychecks for weeks and airport construction projects across the country at a standstill.

Congressional leaders blame each other for the deadlock.

"The House has done its job, and now it's time for senators to do theirs," said House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio.

Democrats would have none of it on Wednesday. They want a "clean" bill, with none of the Republican strings attached.

"I call upon Speaker Boehner to end this," said Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev. "They should send us a clean extension so these people can get back to work."

President Barack Obama made it clear Wednesday that he wants Congress to act, preferably by the end of the week.

"I'm urging the House and the Senate to take care of this," Obama said at the White House. "This is an example of a self-inflicted wound that is unnecessary."

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, in a White House appearance, urged Congress to return from its summer recess and finish the job.

"Come back to Washington. Leave your vacations, just for a couple hours. Come back, Congress," he said.

The partial shutdown of the agency, which started July 23, has idled nearly 4,000 FAA employees and tens of thousands of private-sector construction workers.

Paychecks continue for air-traffic controllers, but dozens of airport safety inspectors are working without pay because the FAA has deemed them essential to the safety of the traveling public.

LaHood said that Americans shouldn't worry about the safety of flying.

"No safety issues will be compromised," he said. "Flying is safe."

Democrats object to two Republican provisions in particular: One would cut \$16 million in subsidies for commercial flights to 13 rural airports, some in the home states of top Senate Democrats, including Reid's Nevada. The other would make it harder for some airline workers to unionize.

If the partial FAA shutdown continues, the government could lose as much as \$1 billion in revenue that it is no longer collecting from taxes on airline tickets.

"This is from the party that is worried about fiscal responsibility," said House Minority Whip Steny Hoyer, D-Md.

Rep. John Mica of Florida, the chairman of the House Transportation Committee, said Senate Democrats had two weeks to act after the House passed the bill, but didn't.

"Senate Democrats have no one to blame but themselves for this partial shutdown of FAA programs and airport projects," Mica said.

But Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative research center, described the Republican provisions as a "poison pill" that they knew Democrats wouldn't accept.

"This is about using your position as leverage," he said. "It's becoming a way of life for House Republicans."

Republican Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas agrees with the Democrats.

"That is not the way we ought to operate," she said Monday on the Senate floor.

Though she supports the Republican provisions, she doesn't think they should be conditions to funding the FAA.

"I cannot believe my colleagues would let the FAA shut down," she said. "Is that going to make the people of our country believe Congress is doing the right thing? It doesn't pass the smell test."

Political analysts said it was another example of Washington's dysfunction.

"We can expect more and more of these types of disruptions in the future," said Chris Edwards, the director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute.

Sarah Binder, a political science professor at George Washington University, blames the increasing polarization of the parties for Congress' inability to compromise, even on routine legislation such as the debt-limit increase or the FAA reauthorization.

"There's this partisan incentive to disagree," she said. "So it makes it much harder for the two sides to accept half a loaf. They want to hold out and try to get the other side to come over so they can keep a whole loaf or to keep an issue alive for an election."

(Lesley Clark contributed to this article.)

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