

Departures Opinions On Current Issues In Aviation

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Extend FAA, Then Get Reauthorization Right

FAA programs—including the critical Airport Improvement Program (AIP)—will expire at the end of September, and there are just a handful of legislative days for Congress to act until then.

The last time Congress faced the expiration of FAA programs, lawmakers ended up passing a series of 23 separate short-term extensions over four-and-a-half years before finally approving a multiyear bill. Those 1,600 days of temporary, patchwork stopgaps lasted longer than the four-year bill lawmakers finally passed.

As philosopher and author George Santayana famously said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” Congress needs to learn from its mistakes of the past and quickly pass a single, 12- to 24-month extension of FAA programs that will provide airports with the planning certainty they need to build critical infrastructure projects. Not only does a “safety net” make sense for airport planning, it will also give policymakers and aviation stakeholders time to reach agreement on a long term, transformational FAA-reauthorization bill.

Congress has a lot on its plate in the coming months: a Continuing Resolution to keep the government funded and agencies open; a highway and transit bill that is years overdue; the national debt limit; and the Export-Import Bank are just some of the biggest fights that loom. FAA programs and the critical infrastructure projects they fund and jobs they create cannot become an afterthought because lawmakers are busy with other tasks.

Don’t underestimate the damaging effect that campaign and Hill politics can have on aviation programs. Last time around, a disagreement led to a two-week partial FAA shut-down. During those two weeks, 4,000 FAA employees were furloughed, hundreds of important construction projects were halted, thousands of construction workers were off the job as the industry faced a double-digit unemployment rate, and the federal government lost \$350 million in revenue that funds crucial infrastructure projects. We can’t afford to let that happen again.

A series of short-term extensions also makes it extremely difficult for airports to plan for the future and address the increased capacity demands that are expected over the coming decade. Stopgap extensions mean airports have to continually start and stop, cancel or delay construction projects—and the problem is magnified for small airports and those in cold climates where construction seasons are extremely short.

With more than \$15 billion in annual capital-construction needs, airports already face significant challenges in planning multiphased

improvement projects. Ensuring certainty with federal funding for airport development with a long-term extension is even more important given growing infrastructure-development needs and the unwillingness of lawmakers to this point to provide airports with the additional local self-help they are seeking to help fund important projects.

Congress has an opportunity to achieve transformational change of our aviation system. But, we cannot achieve truly

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meaningful reform if we spend considerable time staving off turbulent funding stoppages. Providing airports with the safety net that comes

with a long-term extension will enable local airports to continue planning and building projects that will increase airline competition, improve critical infrastructure, spur growth in local economies and create jobs.

To be clear, an extension of 1-2 years for FAA programs should not be seen as throwing in the towel or giving up on a long-term reauthorization of the agency. It simply provides airports with the certainty they need to plan and build critical infrastructure projects.

Nothing in this single extension approach would preclude Congress from acting in the weeks and months ahead to approve a meaningful, multiyear FAA-reauthorization bill. Certainly we hope that Congress can soon pass a long-term FAA reauthorization that enhances the vital role airports play in local communities around the country.

As that work continues, let’s remember our collective experiences of the last FAA reauthorization process and take steps to extend programs one time rather than many. Congress needs to pass a long-term extension so airports aren’t left with a severe and destructive case of déjà vu.

Todd Hauptli is the president and CEO of the American Association of Airport Executives. Hauptli is the third CEO in the association’s history and joined AAAE in 1991. Kevin M. Burke is the president and CEO of Airports Council International–North America, joining in 2014 after 13 years serving as the president and CEO of the American Apparel & Footwear Association.

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