The odds against the U.S. Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) getting all of the funding it needs to quickly implement the NextGen air traffic control (ATC) system are long, indeed (p. 12). Anyone doubting this assessment should look at the history of the two Washington, D.C., airports for precedent.

A native of the Washington area, I have a good memory of the airports’ histories. My first airplane ride was a DC-4 out of Washington National (DCA), and shortly after Washington Dulles (IAD) opened, my friends and I found that the echoing terminal of the underutilized airport was a fun place to spend a day cutting classes.

They were the only two civil airports in the United States owned and operated by the federal government. While the FAA was the official operator of the airports, Congress held the purse strings and therefore had the power to specify exactly what happened, or didn’t happen, at the airports.

And what didn’t happen in either place was any meaningful development, badly needed even before deregulation triggered robust traffic growth. DCA, built on landfill in the Potomac River in the late 1930s, had cramped terminals designed for DC-3s. And IAD’s central design concept of using mobile lounges as both boarding gates and airplane loaders quickly was shown to be seriously flawed.

Despite the desperate need for action at both airports, and the offer of numerous plans to fix the problems, Congress was unable to make any meaningful progress, frozen by a slew of conflicting interests and heavily influenced by representatives from local jurisdictions whose voters were vocal in their objection to anything that could be seen as possibly allowing growth — especially for close-in DCA — bringing increased noise and pollution.

Congress accomplished one thing, however. At DCA, it built a VIP car parking lot for use by members of Congress and Supreme Court justices, just steps away from the main terminal. At least that was cheap.

It wasn’t until 1987 that Congress finally was shamed into transferring both airports to a regional airport authority. Even then, Congress tried to maintain some control through an arrangement that eventually was thrown out by the courts.

The airports’ success was made possible when Congress dropped out of the money loop, a tale that might be useful in considering ways to accelerate the capacity and safety advances of NextGen.