



THE AIRPORTS' Tale

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.

Put into the hands of professional airport managers with independent access to funding on the same basis as other

airports, both facilities blossomed. DCA is the very model of the easy-access, modern airport, pleasant to use and great to look at. IAD is still working toward its long-term layout, but it, too, is much improved.

Blame for slow progress in reshaping the U.S. ATC system is laid on the FAA, which, it must be admitted, is not faultless. However, system funding is far beyond its control.

First, it must run the federal budget development gauntlet, where the agency needs are subject to conflicting priorities even though most of the bills will be paid by system users. Then the agency's needs are put before the 535 micro-managers on Capitol Hill. As the saga of the Washington airports illustrates, this is not a recipe for success.

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.

A large, stylized handwritten signature in black ink that reads "J.A. Donoghue".

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