

## House transportation chairman: Privatize air-traffic control

Bart Jansen, USA TODAY | JUN 15, 2015

WASHINGTON – The air-traffic control system should be removed from the Federal Aviation



*Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., and chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, speaks April 15, 2015 at a Lincoln Day Dinner in Chambersburg, Pa. (Photo: Ryan Blackwell)*

Administration and converted into a private, not-for-profit corporation, a key House chairman said Monday.

Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., who is chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, told the Aero Club of Washington that privatizing air-traffic control with aviation fees would save billions of dollars and provide more stable funding than congressional appropriations.

"Now is the time for transformational change that provides a safe, reliable modern aviation system for our future," Shuster said.

One reason for privatizing is to separate air-traffic control from the FAA's

regulatory duties making sure planes and pilots are safe to fly. But the more vocal argument is to make funding more predictable, after congressional bickering led to FAA furloughs during a partial government shutdown in 2013.

"This will insulate the (private air-traffic control) from events like sequestration, agency closures and government shutdown," Shuster said.

Shuster said the proposal will be part of policy legislation Congress is debating this year for the FAA because current law expires Sept. 30. The Senate and Obama administration will also participate in the talks. A bill will be introduced this month and could see House floor action in July, Shuster said.

White House press secretary Josh Earnest was non-committal on the proposal but said the administration's first priority was to pass a broader aviation bill.

"We have not had an opportunity to review the details of Chairman Shuster's proposal," he said.

"When it comes to a question like this, the first thing to consider is the safety record, and the current air traffic control system has an outstanding safety record."

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said FAA workers manage the most complex aviation environment in the world and "do an outstanding job." But Foxx acknowledged there is room for improvement and said he would carefully review Shuster's proposal that "speaks to some of the weaknesses of the status quo."

"As I have long said, this country deserves a serious conversation about the future of our transportation system and we are willing to have that conversation," Foxx said. "We look forward to working with Congress to make our system even more safe and more efficient."

About 50 countries have privatized air-traffic control during the last 20 years, and there has been no loss in safety, Shuster said.

Government watchdogs have criticized progress in a 20-year upgrade of air-traffic control, a project called NextGen, as over budget and behind schedule.

But FAA Administrator Michael Huerta has said the project is moving forward after delays in building its foundation, such as completion of a network of more precise plane-tracking stations across the country.

Paul Rinaldi, president of the National Air Traffic Controllers Association, has repeatedly called for more predictable funding. He told the Aero Club in April that the controllers' union would discuss privatization so long as it didn't involve a for-profit corporation.

In comparisons to Canada's private air-traffic control, Rinaldi questioned whether that smaller system might not work as well in the sprawling United States. Canada has 12 million takeoffs and landings a year, compared with 140 million in the U.S., he said. Canada has 42 control facilities compared with 342 in the U.S.

A significant question for privatization is how much participants will pay. The FAA's air-traffic organization is budgeted about \$7.5 billion for 30,000 workers.

Air-traffic control is now paid largely by fees that airlines pay the government. But the corporation would determine who pays what share among airlines, business jets and small private planes.

A group of rural-airport advocates wrote lawmakers June 5 voicing concern over giving a private board the authority to set aviation fees, rather than Congress.

The Alliance for Aviation Across America, National Farmers Union, League of Rural Voters, Air Care Alliance and National Agricultural Aviation Association noted that 5,000 airports across the country – the vast majority without airline service – serve critical needs for raising crops, fighting fires and search-and-rescue that Congress should oversee.

For opponents, a Congressional Research Service report in April said legal challenges to a privatization law would likely focus on whether Congress handed too much power to the corporation and whether the federal government maintained enough surveillance of the system.

Contributing: Gregory Korte

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