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AND HOLDING

By John Perkinson, Staff Writer

Congress has once again sidestepped its responsibility, approving a short-term extension to fund the FAA, the 22nd extension since October 2007, instead of reauthorizing the agency through a multi-year funding bill. That decision means the Senate and House have until the end of January 2012 to reach an agreement on meaningful legislation that would enable the agency to adequately modernize the aging U.S. air transportation system, or pass the buck for a 23rd time.

With the economy and job growth high on the nation's political agenda, Congress's actions—or, more appropriately, inactions—are nothing less than perplexing. Commercial aviation is responsible for \$1.2 trillion in annual U.S. economic activity and millions of well-paying American jobs, and a properly funded bill would likely increase these figures.

"It is unconscionable that Congress has been unable to enact a multi-year funding bill for the Federal Aviation Administration," said Capt. Lee Moak, president of the Air Line Pilots Association, Int'l. "As a result, the FAA—and the American public—remain in a holding pattern, unable to plan or make key decisions to implement critically needed aviation infrastructure and safety improvement programs. The safety and growth of the U.S. air transportation system are at risk.

"U.S. efforts to modernize its air traffic control system to achieve capacity and efficiency gains are on hold without long-term FAA funding. Updating the air traffic control system will not only enhance aviation safety, but will also position the U.S. airline industry to match competitors in Asia and Europe as they continue to advance their systems. While Congress drags its feet on a long-term reauthorization, other countries are pursuing new technology to provide more passengers and cargo shippers with the safest and most efficient air transportation possible," Moak said.

Funding lapses

Congress's shortsighted behavior was previously demonstrated this summer when federal lawmakers permitted the previous FAA funding extension to lapse on July 22. This inaction resulted in a two-week partial shutdown of the agency, the

suspension of airport improvement projects, and the furlough of scores of thousands of workers. The government lost nearly \$400 million in airline ticket taxes during the shutdown because airlines did not have the authority to collect these fees.

The shutdown stemmed in part from a debate

CONGRESS PUTS FAA, NEXTGEN ON HOLD; PASSES YET ANOTHER STOPGAP MEASURE

between the House and Senate about the continuation of essential air service funding for rural airports located less than 90 miles from a medium or large airport hub. The 21st extension eliminated \$16 million in funding for these facilities. The two groups also debated National Mediation Board rules for representational elections.

Although several long-term bills have been proposed by both the Senate and the House since October 2007, partisan debate on spending, taxes, legislative riders, and other concerns has

AVIATION LEGISLATION WITH VISION

The Federal Aviation Act of 1958 (PL. 85-726, 72 Stat. 731) established the Federal Aviation Agency (later known as the Federal Aviation Administration), granting it the authority to oversee and regulate airline safety and to control civilian and military use of the U.S. national airspace system. The power to regulate air transportation and the airline industry is derived



from Congress's authority under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution to regulate interstate commerce.

On Nov. 1, 1958, Elwood R. Quesada, right, took the oath as the FAA's first administrator.

prevented members of Congress from reaching agreement.

Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.V.), ranking member on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, recently said, “Pending enactment of a long-term bill, this short-term extension is the responsible path forward. It will avert more damage to the aviation system and the economy.” However, he reminded his fellow members of Congress of the need to put “planes and passengers before politics.”

The latest extension allows the FAA to continue collecting airline ticket taxes and holds airport construction funding at previous levels.

Going door to door

For some time now, the Association has been actively promoting a long-term FAA funding solution. ALPA pilots have been walking the halls of the Capitol and meeting with members of Congress to



F/O Stanley Adams (North American, second from left) confers with an aide to Sen. Michael Bennet (D-Colo.). Flanking Adams are Capt. Doug Ralph (Delta, to Adams’s right) and Capt. Fred Eissler (FedEx Express).

advocate ALPA’s position on this and other important issues. Pilots like F/O Stanley Adams (North American), vice chairman of his pilot group’s Master Executive Council, work in conjunction with ALPA’s Government Affairs Department to educate lawmakers about needed legislation and regulations from a front-line perspective.

With the hands-on knowledge that can only come from time spent in the cockpit, Adams and his fellow pilots explain the ramifications of congressional decisions—how some might seem beneficial in the context of day-to-day operations but could prove disruptive or even harmful to air travel.

Adams was on the Hill in uniform the week of September 12, meeting with members of Congress to talk with them about issues like FAA reauthorization.

“There are a wide range of reasons we need long-term legislation to fund the FAA,” said Adams. “The benefits of funding a long-term reauthorization bill include added jobs, needed infrastructure upgrades

like runway improvements, new environmental controls, and other developments that will help us better cope with operational and safety challenges.

“The current national airspace system is safe, but with these improvements we can make it safer,” he added.

Moak agreed. “Airline pilots take extremely seriously our responsibility to fly passengers and cargo safely through inclement weather, congested airspace, and other challenging environments. We count on a modern air traffic control system, but we don’t currently have the new technology and updated equipment we need—or that passengers and shippers expect—in the U.S. air transportation infrastructure.

“The lack of long-term reauthorization threatens efforts to address critical aviation issues such as NextGen air traffic control, wake turbulence, alternative fuels, windshear warning systems, and volcanic ash, as well as working to make aircraft operations safer while increasing system capacity and ensuring airline growth and profitability,” Moak explained.

An agency held hostage

Speaking at the Oakland International Airport several days before the latest extension was enacted, FAA Administrator and former ALPA President Randy Babbitt provided some perspective. He said, “The FAA has had 21 short-term reauthorizations in the last four years. Parceling out money to the FAA in short-term increments makes it very difficult to plan the long-term improvements we need. It makes it difficult for America to remain the leader.

“The FAA provides a vital service to America, and we need Congress to support this important work by passing a multi-year FAA reauthorization bill to keep America flying,” Babbitt noted.

Addressing ALPA’s 57th ALPA Safety Forum at the awards dinner in August, Babbitt emphasized, “It’s increasingly important that Congress understands that there are real costs and consequences associated with failing to authorize the FAA.”

Despite the passage of this latest extension, the 112th U.S. Congress is free to revisit this issue and pass a fully funded, more comprehensive bill anytime between now and the end of January 2012, when the current stopgap measure expires. For this reason, ALPA continues to press lawmakers to act. “We call on the U.S. House of Representatives to follow the actions of the U.S. Senate and name their committee conferees so that a final long-term reauthorization bill can be developed and passed,” Moak commented.

“Between the critical research that helps guarantee the safety of the traveling public, the urgent need to modernize, and the risk to our country’s competitiveness, Congress cannot move quickly enough to immediately provide the FAA with comprehensive, long-term funding,” he added. 🌐