

Bond Case Briefs

Municipal Finance Law Since 1971

New House FAA Bill Text Released; Good News for County Priorities.

FAA reauthorization bill increases Essential Air Service funding, topping out at \$350 million

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) introduced his much-anticipated FAA reauthorization bill June 21. With the current one-year extension expiring on Sept. 30, this new bill would last for six years, providing more long-term certainty regarding aviation policy. While the national headlines may gravitate to the intention of privatizing air-traffic control, there are several provisions included in the bill that are positive for county governments.

Chairman Shuster's bill, the 21st Century Aviation Innovation, Reform and Reauthorization Act (21st Century AIRR Act) will be brought before the House transportation committee this week for a markup with the hopes of a full floor vote when Congress returns from the July 4 recess. The Senate will soon introduce its own version of a long-term FAA bill in the coming days as well.

The bill contains several key features for counties. The Essential Air Service (EAS) program, which supports commercial flights for the nation's most rural communities, would see increased funding each year throughout the bill's lifetime. In fact, the final year of the authorization would fund EAS at \$350 million, almost double the current funding level.

This vital program to connect the nation's most rural communities with larger transportation hubs will ensure continued travel options for county residents as well as key opportunities for economic development. In his budget blueprint earlier this month, President Trump had advocated for the program's elimination.

Also included in the bill is language that acknowledges NACo's call for greater local government involvement in the development and implementation of policy regarding unmanned aerial systems, or drones, within their boundaries. The bill mandates that recommendations for local government roles and responsibilities be addressed specifically through the Drone Advisory Committee's (DAC) Task Group on Roles and Responsibilities (TG1).

NACo is the only local government group with representation both on the DAC and TG1. This will make NACo a primary voice as these federally-formed groups continue their work to develop an appropriate framework for local government involvement and successful UAS implementation.

Another NACo priority, the Airport Improvement Program (AIP), a key grant mechanism to assist airports in starting new projects, would see an increase in the 21st Century AIRR Act. Funding levels under the bill would increase each year through 2023, in total raising AIP funding from the current level of \$3.35 billion to slightly more than \$3.8 billion, which amounts to a \$467 million increase.

With committee markup scheduled for this week, amendments to the bill may be made in hopes of patching together enough support to pass the full House. NACo will continue to advocate for county priorities, including raising the Passenger Facilities Charge (which remained unchanged), which has

not been increased since 2000. Currently capped at \$4.50, an increase in this ticket fee would allow all airports to address their infrastructure needs in a timelier manner.

Other provisions in the bill address passenger rights, including banning airlines from bumping a passenger once they have boarded the airplane— a direct result of the United Airlines incident earlier this year — to new requirements to provide space for mothers to nurse at medium and large-sized airports. Additionally, commercial airlines will now be required by law to notify the public of any system-wide power outages, which have caused substantial delays for passengers over the past few years.

The future of the bill, though, remains uncertain, primarily due to the inclusion of language that would privatize the air traffic control system. Some fear the measure could see a repeat of last year, where the insistence on privatizing air-traffic control as part of the bill resulted in time running out on the congressional calendar, forcing the one-year extension that is now in place.

Currently there is both support and opposition on both sides of the aisle, and given the potential for debate over privatization and other provisions of the bill, it is unclear how quickly the legislation will be able to proceed.

National Association of Counties

Jun. 26, 2017

by Kevan Stone

Associate Legislative Director - Transportation

Kevan Stone serves as NACo's Associate Legislative Director for Transportation and Infrastructure. He is responsible for all policy development and advocacy pertaining to the county role in ownership and maintenance of roads, bridges, airports and other important infrastructure.