

Putting Rural America First in Aviation

by Bruce Westerman
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A bill expected on the House floor as soon as next week would address years of concerns and complaints from rural America when it comes to aviation issues. The 21st Century Aviation Innovation, Reform, and Reauthorization (AIRR) Act would benefit small and rural communities through improved airport infrastructure, advanced remote tower technology, and a strengthened contract tower program. Finally AIRR would give a voice to rural and small communities on aviation issues affecting its citizens.

For too long, our aviation assets have been managed by bureaucrats in Washington with little to no input from the citizens most impacted by their top-down decisions. Nowhere is that more true than in rural America, places like the Fourth Congressional District of Arkansas which I represent in Congress. The 21st Century AIRR Act benefits these communities through local empowerment. This legislation provides rural communities a voice in aviation matters that its citizens have been denied.

The bill would also affect airport infrastructure through enhancements to the Airport Improvement Program (AIP). The AIP would receive new funding levels that would ensure grant availability for small airports in the years ahead. Grants provided through this program support construction and rehabilitation of runways, hangars, and other vital infrastructure at local air facilities. Such infrastructure is a necessity for communities which seek to expand economic development through air transportation. Simply put, jobs are created when rural airports have the funding to improve and maintain infrastructure.

Remote tower technology is a new concept and its viability is currently being tested in multiple locations. It has the potential to greatly improve functions at rural airports by allowing such facilities to maintain tower service for a far lower cost. This technology allows for unmanned towers to be utilized in order to bring service to airports that had previously been unable to support such usage. Under the 21st Century AIRR Act, funding continues the testing and implementation of remote air traffic control tower technology.

Communities would also benefit from a strengthened contract tower program under this legislation. Rural and remote airports would continue to receive uninterrupted service while other rural communities could enter the program without delay due to FAA inaction. Current caps on the grant program would be eliminated. This would ensure contract tower construction, equipment, and technology acquisitions continue unimpeded, which would

ensure safety and service in the communities under contract. Should closure of a tower be proposed, communities, tower owners, and private citizens would be given the option to challenge the closure. Under the current system, an unelected bureaucrat in Washington can cancel a contract with only a 30-day notice, leaving a community without any means of air transportation.

Last but not least, this bill would reform America's outdated and underfunded air traffic control system. At the cost of tens of billions of dollars to the taxpayer for more than two decades, our government has attempted to rebuild an outdated system that has fallen further behind as passenger numbers have increased and technology has advanced. Countries like Canada have gone to a non-profit air traffic control model that is not dependent on government funding and can provide for continuous capital investment. The non-profit, under the leadership of a CEO answerable to a board of directors – which closely resembles the co-op model in the U.S. – would be empowered to reinvest into the system and make decisions based on marketplace realities instead of politics. Such a system has proven successful the world over and should be implemented here in the United States.

When this bill comes to the House floor, I believe Republicans and Democrats will come together to do what is best for our rural communities and the overall air traffic control system. The 21st Century AIRR Act is visionary, innovative legislation that will make the long-needed improvements to keep our skies safe for the American people.

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