Halt FAA's Wasteful Revamp of Air Traffic Control

By NICK RAHALL
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Air traffic controllers are one of those modern parts of life that, when everything is working smoothly, you never notice their role. On a daily basis, they ensure 2 million Americans get safely across the skies; at any given moment, there are some 5,000 flights in the air over the United States, each carefully tracked and accounted for by a Federal Aviation Administration air traffic controller.

Air travel has become one of the safest, most convenient modes of transportation. According to a recent report, commercial and private air travel is safer than traveling by bike, foot, passenger car, bus and train. While this can partially be attributed to the work of well-trained pilots and safer aircraft, it's largely due to the critical work of our nation's air traffic controllers.

It's only when air travel is interrupted that we, the traveling public, realize the vital role air traffic controllers play in propelling passengers and our nation's economy.

With this in mind, our country faces a looming transportation challenge that could have major ramifications on air passenger safety. As the longest-serving member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, I was in the trenches as Congress grappled with many transportation challenges over the past 38 years. Unlike some we dealt with in the past, this one is preventable.

Recently the FAA proposed shuttering the training program it uses to prepare our nation's air traffic controllers for service — the Air Traffic Control Optimum Training Solution — and start from scratch with an entirely new, untested program. This would result in a shortage of air traffic controllers, higher costs to taxpayers and increasing flight delays and cancellations for passengers.

The FAA has been using ATCOTS, the gateway to guiding passengers and cargo safely across the skies, since 2009. Training consists of technical curriculum, field site-specific courses, radar simulation, scenario-based training and regulatory rules and procedures. Upon completion of ATCOTS, trainees test to become Certified Professional Controllers. From 2009 to 2013, the program successfully delivered more than 8,000 certified controllers.

Though the FAA's current air traffic controller training program has been successful in bringing qualified controllers online — even with the additional budgetary challenges from sequestration — the FAA still wants to shut it down.

This seems odd and untimely, and it seems the impetus behind the FAA's rash move appears to be an effort to deflect attention from its own poor management of its current training program.

The Department of Transportation inspector general has issued two reports citing a litany of problems with the FAA's internal management of the ATCOTS program, including significant cost overruns, poor procurement practices and a lack of oversight.

For example, an IG official testified before Congress that in the program's initial five years, the FAA mismanaged its budget for the program with four straight years of cost overruns amounting to $89 million. This resulted in FAA depleting its entire five-year budget for the program in just four years.

Ironically, a major goal of the FAA in the ATCOTS program was to reduce its training costs by developing and implementing innovative and more efficient training practices. Though more than

40 technology and process improvement suggestions have been developed throughout the course of the program, the FAA has failed to adopt even one of them, resulting in no cost savings.

The IG provided a raft of recommendations to get the FAA's management of the program back on track, but the FAA, instead, has continued with business as usual.

Now, rather than acknowledging its own errors and focusing on fixing them, the FAA is trying to bypass the intent of Congress by introducing a new air traffic controller training program without providing any justification of any kind.

Further, in recent years the FAA has introduced a new hiring process that will further exacerbate its inability to assess the true costs and time required for controller training. Ultimately, starting from scratch to bring online a new program will have significant extra cost to taxpayers; all efficiencies and cost savings that ATCOTS developed will be lost.

But these attempts have not escaped the watchful eye of Congress.

The Senate and House appropriations committees included language in the fiscal year 2015 Omnibus Bill requiring the FAA to implement the recommendations outlined in the DOT IG reports before it could consider an alternative training program. And at a hearing last year, Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-Mo.), who has been investigating the FAA's management of the ATCOTS program since 2011, promised, "I'm going to be on it like a rabid dog," in her efforts to ensure the FAA fixes its problems with management and oversight.

What makes the FAA leadership think it can introduce a brand new initiative when it has failed to effectively manage the old one?

Bringing a new program online would take significant time and further stretch taxpayer dollars in today's austere budget environment. The additional time and resources would be better spent addressing the IG's recommendations and making immediate improvements to improve passenger safety.

Further, a new training program won't magically fix the FAA's own internal deficiencies in management and oversight as outlined by the IG. Only a concerted effort by the FAA to address its internal mismanagement practices can turn things around.

Worse yet, the FAA's timing is terrible. We currently face a shortfall in the number of qualified, well-trained air traffic controllers to monitor our airspace as nearly 11,000 controllers approach the mandatory retirement age. Through 2021, the FAA must hire and train more than 12,000 air traffic controllers. This would be a daunting task with an efficiently managed program, let alone an entirely new, unproven training regimen.

Air traffic controllers are responsible for the travel of about 2 million passengers per day. They serve in a critical role to ensure planes, with people and cargo, take off and land safely. The nation cannot afford to have their training program compromised.

I urge my former colleagues in Congress to continue pressuring the FAA to correct internal management deficiencies and prevent the agency from introducing costly, duplicative programs. Otherwise, the FAA's rebranding attempt will come at the expense of the flying public.

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