

(June 6, 2006) Midway Given Safety Grant

Midway given a safety grant\$15 million to start runway-safety project

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The federal government on Monday announced a \$15 million grant for Chicago to begin building runway-safety-buffer zones at Midway Airport, where a Southwest Airlines plane skidded off a runway in December and killed a child riding in a car on Central Avenue.

The U.S. Department of Transportation funding will be used toward the estimated \$40 million cost to construct beds of crushable concrete just beyond the ends of Midway's short runways to slow planes that overrun their landings.

The lightweight concrete system, in place at about 15 U.S. airports, collapses under a plane's landing gear and provides a quick, controlled deceleration.

Pending the Federal Aviation Administration's approval of the city's plan, work will start this year to install the system on the northwest corner of the airport, at 55th Street and Central, city officials said.

That corner is where the Southwest plane came to a stop on Dec. 8 after sliding off snowy Runway 31 Center and plowing through fences before striking the car carrying Joshua Woods, 6, and his family. The Indiana boy was killed on impact.

If the city gets additional federal money, it plans to expand the buffer system to include three other runway ends in 2007, said Chicago Aviation Commissioner Nuria Fernandez.

Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.), whose congressional district includes Midway, said it's not enough to rest on Midway's relatively good safety record.

"After the crash we saw this winter, it is clear that building these runway-safety areas will enhance the safety of every passenger using the airport and everybody in the neighborhood," Lipinski said.

Installation will be trickier at Midway than elsewhere because the Southwest Side airport has a shorter distance from its perimeter to the ends of its runways than is recommended for standard use of the buffer concrete system.

The National Transportation Safety Board is scheduled to hold a fact-finding hearing June 21-22 on the accident at Midway.

Officials from the Chicago Department of Aviation are expected to face intense questioning at the hearing. Focal points will include the icy condition of the runway on the night of the accident; the accuracy of information city officials provided to the FAA air-traffic-control tower at Midway and the Southwest pilots; and the city's go-slow approach to improving runway safety at the 80-year-old airport.

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