

(January 26, 2007) Ill. Dems lobby for federal airport funds

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Illinois' Democratic congressional delegation flexed some of its new political muscle Thursday, bringing the head of the Federal Aviation Administration to Chicago and pushing for millions of dollars in federal funds for airport-safety enhancements and runway expansion at O'Hare International Airport.

After inspecting the new crushable concrete-block safety zone designed to stop planes from overshooting runways at Midway, FAA Administrator Marion Blakey promised to help find \$15 million to install more of the "arrestor beds" before the end of the year.

Blakey said the FAA agreed to speed up installation of new runway-safety technology at O'Hare to 12 months from 24 months. The technology, called Airport Surface Detection Equipment-X, more accurately predicts when a runway incursion between two aircraft is developing and gives controllers more time to radio warnings to the planes involved.

She said the technology could be installed at Midway by 2010.

"The delegation made a very compelling case and I agree with them," she said.

But Blakey downplayed the reported \$400 million in cost overruns on the \$15 billion O'Hare expansion project, saying "those things happen."

"I think everyone here has to understand that O'Hare modernization is the most important airport project in the world today," Blakey said.

Blakey toured Midway at the behest of U.S. Reps. Jerry Costello and Dan Lipinski, both Illinois Democrats who advanced to more powerful aviation and transportation oversight roles with their party's new majority in the House.

The first Midway safety zone, on the airport's northwest corner, was completed last month, a year after a Southwest Airlines plane skidded off the end of a snowy runway and killed a child in a car on Central Avenue. Work on a second arrestor bed, on the airport's southwest corner, is scheduled to begin this spring.

Officials have pledged to install the safety zones at runway ends on the northeast and southeast corners by the end of the year, but currently there is no funding for the \$15 million project.

Regarding O'Hare expansion, Blakey said the FAA would look favorably on the city's request to use some \$270 million in passenger-ticket tax revenue to cover some of the project's \$400 million shortfall. The funds would cover higher-than-projected costs for property acquisition and relocation of displaced residents and businesses.

She said the FAA was "very impressed" with Chicago's efforts at keeping costs under control. She called use of the ticket tax "a great way to raise revenue."

Blakey rejected a request from the Illinois congressional delegation to move up installation of a backup radar system at O'Hare, which is scheduled for 2008 as part of the airport expansion project.

Costello, Lipinski and other lawmakers had sought the speedup to avoid a repeat of the radar system failure Dec. 15 that delayed hundreds of flights. The system fails several times a year.