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Check Midway Improvements

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Following a tour of Midway Airport last Thursday, Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd), joined by Cong. Jerry Costello (D-12th), of downstate Belleville, and Federal Aviation Administration Administrator Marion Blakey, discussed recent safety improvements made at the airport, as well as others that are planned.

Chicago Department of Aviation Commissioner Nuria Fernandez led the officials' tour of the airport, which included viewing the bed of crushable concrete that was installed at the end of one of the four runways in December.

Installation of the first arrestor bed was funded by a \$15 million grant the FAA provided last June for the first phase of the project to install the Engineered Material Arresting Systems (EMAS) at the end of all four runways at Midway.

EMAS consists of a bed of specially coated cement blocks engineered to collapse under the weight of an aircraft's landing gear should it overshoot the end of a runway.

The first runway to get an arrestor bed was the one that a Southwest Airlines plane slid off during a snowstorm in December 2005, crashing through the perimeter fence onto Central Avenue and killing a child traveling in a car.

The funding needed to install arrestor beds for the other three runways by the end of this year will be forthcoming, Blakey said at the press conference after the tour.

"Midway has always been a safe airport, and this makes it even safer," said Lipinski.

"It is very important to me to make sure the airport is safe for the people who live near it," said the congressman, who grew up a few blocks west of the airport.

"I've been on the Transportation Committee for eight days, and organizing this tour of Midway was the first thing I wanted to do," said Lipinski, who was assigned to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and its Aviation Subcommittee that Costello now heads as chairman, when the Democrats took control of the House in January.

And Costello said he was "happy to make Midway my first field visit" as chairman.

"Chicago is a key national and international aviation hub and it is critical that the city of Chicago, Congress, and the Federal Aviation Administration work together to continue to ensure the safety and vitality of both Midway and O'Hare airports," said Lipinski.

"Through collaboration we brought new safety upgrades to Midway Airport which will greatly enhance the safety of the flying public and everyone around the airport," said the congressman.

"The airport is safe but that does not mean it cannot be safer," said Blakey.

The FAA administrator noted that a new radar system aimed at preventing collisions on runways is being installed at O'Hare this summer, "12 months ahead of schedule," and is expected to be deployed at Midway by 2010.

She said it was a priority to install the equipment at O'Hare first because there were 10 runway incursions of errant planes or other vehicles at that much larger airport, and only one at Midway.

The technology known as Airport Surface Detection Equipment X is designed to alert the control tower whenever a vehicle of any kind approaches a runway that is in use.

"It detects movement on the ground so that runway incursions can be mitigated," said Blakey, adding that the advanced radar system works very well at night and in bad weather.

"(Blakey) has been very responsive to our request to expedite technology at both airport," said Costello.

Installing the radar equipment could cost between \$12 million and \$15 million, according to the FAA.

"For the sake of the residents of northeastern Illinois and the flying public, I am committed to working with Chairman Costello and the rest of the Aviation Subcommittee, as well as with the FAA and the City of Chicago, to continue improvements at our local airports," said Lipinski.

The expansion project under way at O'Hare was also discussed at the press conference.

Rosemarie Andolino, executive director of the O'Hare Modernization Program, acknowledged that there have been cost overruns of \$400 million on the project aimed at alleviating chronic congestion at O'Hare.

Blakey said the overruns have been caused primarily by the litigation and other issues related to the need to acquire land surrounding the city, and thereby are mostly outside the city's control.

She said she would be supportive of the city's plans to use passenger facility charges at O'Hare to pay for the additional costs.